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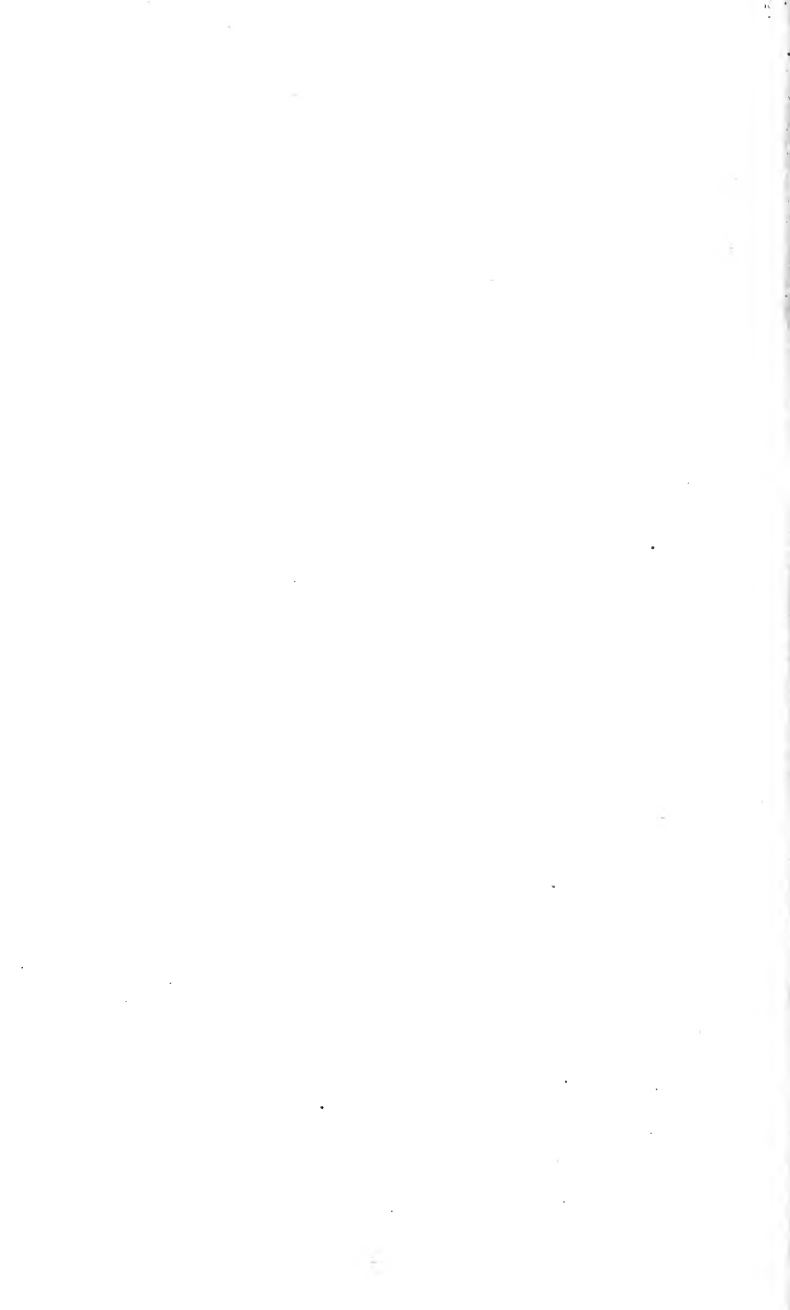
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THE HARDING SCANDAL

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THE HARDING SCANDAL

BY

FRANK BARRETT

AUTHOR OF

'THE ADMIRABLE LADY BIDDY FANE,' 'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.



IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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THE HARDING SCANDAL

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW LEAD.

THE General's composition was not such stuff as stage villains are made of; he was not wicked from a diabolical love of wickedness. On the contrary, he would have very much preferred to steer clear of dangerous practices—to be benevolent, charitable, and worthily beloved by all; in other words, he would have liked to possess, say, twenty thousand a year to bestow freely as he pleased. But as he had nothing in the world but a large number of unpaid debts, the case was different. He dreaded poverty only less

than he dreaded death, and, like many others, he had to struggle for existence; and as existence for him involved the possession of a certain amount of worldly comforts, which he had no legitimate means of obtaining, he found himself under the necessity of making the wants of others subservient to his own, upon the accepted principle that necessity knows no law.

Picking his way back to the ford, with memory echoing the passionate message of Denise to Harry, he thought of the joy he could bring into those two lives by delivering it to him with a simple confession of the truth, and he asked himself if he could afford it. A very slight amount of consideration showed him that he could not afford it. What would he gain by clearing away the delusions that separated the husband and wife now, and promised to widen into an impassable gulf? Nothing—not a *maravedi*!

They would not be even commonly grateful to him. Ignoring his self-sacrifice — attributing it probably to fear, self-seeking, or some baser motive — they would consider only the sacrifice he had meditated making of their happiness, and with no feeling (save one of indignation), they would possibly turn their backs on him, shut their door in his face, and leave him to fare as he might, unassisted. No ; he certainly could not afford it ; such self-sacrifice was not to be thought of ; circumstances compelled him to profit by the providential coincidences which had already put him in possession of a well-stuffed note-book.

Liz had given him the key of the back-door that he might let himself in at will, she having bolted the front-door as a protection against the possible return of Thrale and Lady Harding ; so he entered the cottage noiselessly, and, finding the lower room

empty, stepped lightly upstairs, guessing that Liz was with Harding, and curious to know how they got on in his absence.

He found Liz seated on a low chair by the bedside, her fingers knotted upon her knees, her body bending forward, and her eyes fixed upon Harding's face with all the melting tenderness of a young mother. The General, in his quality of dilettante, stopped a moment to admire the pretty picture, thinking what a lot an artist chappie might make of the subject, if he could only render that look.

The door creaked on its old hinges as he pushed it wide to pass in. Liz started, raising her finger in alarm, for Harding slept ; and a little murmur of regret came from her parted lips as Harding turned upon his pillow. His dream must have been sweet, his awaking even sweeter, for a smile played upon his lips, and he held forth his hand, saying softly :

‘*You*, dear?’

Liz quietly took his raised hand in hers, and held it close and tenderly. But as he opened his drowsy eyes and saw whose face it was that leaned towards him, the smile faded away, leaving only perplexity in its place, and, as his wandering glance fell upon the General, he drew his hand from Liz’s, and closed his eyes again with a bitter sigh.

‘It’s only your friend, sir,’ said Liz soothingly. ‘*She* shan’t come near you; all the doors is bolted.’

Few and low as the words were that Denise had spoken the night before, the sound of her voice had reached Harding’s ear, and he had questioned Liz, and heard her account of the interview, given with her belief that Denise and Thrale, companions in vice, and heartlessly self-seeking, had come with the hope of finding him a dead

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man, and gone discomfited away, finding that he lived.

Once more the General, looking down on the boyish face, on which Old Care was marking the first lines in the contracted brow and down-drawn lips, asked himself if he could anyhow afford to realize his young friend's dream of joy, and gave up the endeavour as a useless job.

'If they want to see me die, let them come!' Harding exclaimed suddenly, and in passionate despair.

'There, there! don't you worry about them—they're not worth it, dear boy,' said the General. 'They'll bother us no more now. I've just been into the village, and I find they went away this morning.'

'This morning!'

'Yes; they stayed at the Wheatsheaf last night.'

'Oh, think of that!' cried Liz indignantly,

ignoring the fact that it was impossible for them to leave the night before.

‘And I might have been dying the while,’ said Harding. ‘It seems almost impossible, doesn’t it? Those two who seemed so true and loyal to me!’

‘About as bad as they make ’em,’ remarked the General, in an off-handed tone of contempt, as he held out his arm, with a look to Liz to pull his sleeve. ‘But that’s the better reason for regarding their loss with indifference, isn’t it, old chappie? A misdeal’s only vexatious when you happen to hold the best cards in your hand. Good riddance to sad rubbish,’ he continued, disengaging himself from his coat, and crossing to poke the fire. ‘Shuffle up the damned cards, and begin all over again, with a better chance of good luck in the next deal. I remember when we were playing pool at Lord Newington’s——’ And he began to

reel off with spirit one of his interminable yarns.

He was a capital story-teller, having an excellent memory, a large inventive faculty, some wit, and the tact to divergate into any channel that he perceived was agreeable to his audience. He could go on for hours when it suited him, and never weary, when, as in the present case, he saw his own advantage in making his chatter agreeable. To his ability as a ready *raconteur* he owed in a great measure his wide popularity, and the indulgence that most men extended, despite that shadowy something which clung to him.

He leant against the mantel-shelf, with his back to the fire and a cigar in the corner of his mouth, talking on and on, forcing Harding to listen, despite his disposition to brood over his grief, and, finally, to take interest, and find a feeble sort of amusement in the rambling narrative. It was all jargon and a

pack of nonsense to Liz, the General having no interest in amusing her, and soon she slipped out of the room with a sigh, to think that she had not the old man's power to charm away Harding's bitter grief and distract his thoughts from his wrongs.

‘By the way,’ said he, in one of his many discursions, ‘which route did you take when you went down South?’

‘Through Belgium and Switzerland.’

‘Beastly lot of changing. I always go along the Riviera, and generally stay there. Better climate than Naples, and much more lively. There's a snug little villa at Mentone that I can get for a mere song—close by the rail, and about ten minutes' run from Monte Carlo. Suit us to a T. Thinking of it just now as I waded through the slush. What a change! Cloudless sky, gardens one mass of roses, orange-grove one side, bit of an olive-wood on the other; mountains at the

back shutting out the north and east winds, glorious sea in front, and Monte Carlo just round the point of Cap St. Martin. Take the grand express—shut your eyes upon all the misery on earth, and open them upon all the joys in creation.'

'It must be good,' said Harding, staring up at the beams. 'I shall be glad to get out of this—this awful place.'

'We'll be there in a fortnight, dear chappie, if Yardley's as good as his word,' cried the General gleefully.

Liz heard that through the door, and a feeling of hatred possessed her. Envy and jealousy rankled in her heart, and to such a degree that the General, on coming down to the chop he had ordered for his lunch, observed that something was wrong, by her pinched nostrils, her closed lips, and her averted glance, as much as by her lack of attention to his personal comforts.

‘ Been listening at the door again,’ he said to himself. ‘ Taken a sudden dislike to me. This won’t do. A single word from her may upset all my calculations. Must find out what’s amiss and smooth her down.’

And therewith the wily tactician set himself to overcome Liz’s silence, and make himself agreeable to *her*.

CHAPTER XVII.

ONLY A SLAVEY.

‘How’s your mamma this morning?’ the General began.

‘About the same, thank you,’ replied Liz, whisking a clean napkin out of the dresser drawer.

‘Has she had medical advice?’

‘The doctor can’t do nothing, he says.’

‘That’s a bad look-out for her—and you, too.’

Liz tossed her head to signify that it was useless to discuss that point, and, having spread her napkin on a tray, took the basin that was to contain Harding’s beef-tea to the

light to make sure it was speckless ; and the General, slowly munching a piece of bread, leant back in his chair and admired the pleasant outline of her figure in silhouette, her pretty profile, the light playing upon a straying curl in the nape of her neck.

‘ I should like to see you in a cap, Liz,’ he observed.

‘ Why ?’ she asked, turning upon him sharply.

‘ It would become you well—set off your pretty hair to advantage.’

Liz had in her time received so many compliments, from young as well as elderly gentlemen, that she cared little for this one.

‘ Oh, I thought you fancied the gentleman might like me better in a cap.’

‘ Perhaps he would.’

She set down the basin, took something from another drawer, went into the scullery,

and presently reappeared in a dainty little muslin cap with long strings.

‘Very fetching,’ observed the General.

Liz had not asked for his opinion, and, taking no notice of it, poured the beef-tea from the saucepan into the basin.

‘There’s no prettier costume in the world than the English domestic servant’s of to-day.’

Liz cut the dry toast in fingers, contemptuously silent. She wasn’t in service now, and wouldn’t have put on this badge of servitude to please anyone—except the gentleman upstairs, who might feel freer to accept her attentions if he knew she was only a servant.

‘There’s only one costume that comes any way near it for smartness,’ continued the General in the same equal tones.

Liz would have given anything to know what that costume was; but she would not ask him, when all he thought about was

getting the gentleman away as soon as he could to some foreign part, where she should never, never go. So she carried the tray upstairs, still wondering about that costume, and the General finished his chop alone.

She stayed with Harding till he had drunk his tea, shaking up and smoothing his pillow, busying herself about the room, and talking chiefly about the weather. He smiled gratefully at her when she drew the bedclothes tenderly over his shoulders, and she came down in better temper, apologizing to the General for being so long, and hastening to remove his plate, and set the cheese and butter before him.

‘Did he admire your cap?’ asked the General.

‘I think so. He looked very kind at me. But he didn’t say much, being so weak and down-hearted, poor gentleman!’

‘It will do him good to see you now and

then. He's been used to women's society, and would feel the loss of it if you weren't here to look after him. I can distract his thoughts—that's good in its way ; but you can soothe him, and that's better.'

Liz was delighted, but she said nothing to that effect, only she asked the General if he wouldn't have a glass of ale with his cheese instead of that sour stuff, indicating the Beaune sent down from the Wheatsheaf by the General's order. The General declined the mixture.

'What costume was that you were talking about?' Liz asked presently. She was quite 'friends' with the General now, and if only he would not take the gentleman away so soon, he would have been really nice in her estimation.

'A nurse's.'

'A nurse? Oh, I don't think much of that!' she said, with disapprobation in her voice.

‘ I don’t mean the ordinary black and white affair, but something artistic—something that a lady might wish to wear—a nice soft material that falls in pretty folds.’

‘ Cashmere ?’

‘ Yes ; that would do—cashmere of a pale slatey-blue.’

‘ Silver-gray.’

‘ With a nice lining to harmonize.’

‘ Red ?’

‘ ‘M no ; I should say blue.’

‘ Blue would look very nice when the cape fell back.’

‘ The usual white cuffs and collars, and then a dear little Dutch bonnet with a narrow white frill ’—the General looked at the girl with the half-closed eyes of an æsthetic critic—‘ with a sort of a scoop at the back to allow your hair being seen in loose curls.’

‘ Rolls ?’

‘ Or a bun, if they keep in fashion.’

‘Misseses won’t let you wear ’em,’ said Liz with a sigh.

‘Do you hanker very greatly after going into service again?’

‘Not me! I’m sick and tired of it. But once a servant, always a servant, they say, if a girl wants to keep straight. It ain’t no good me thinking of being a hospital nurse; I’m too old, for one thing, to begin, and I couldn’t afford to go in for all the probationing and things.’

‘Still, a clever, pleasant, nice-looking girl might be a nurse to an invalid without the requirements of a hospital nurse.’

Liz, crossing the room, stopped suddenly, and turned, breathless, to know by the General’s look if he ‘meant anything’ by these hints. The General ignored her questioning regard, and, filling his glass, asked if she had written to her sisters.

‘Not yet. Why?’

‘I was only thinking that this must be a terribly dull life for a lively girl like you.’

‘Oh, I can’t stand it! I love mother better than they do; but to stay here and see no one from week’s end to week’s end, it’s enough to make one wicked.’

‘That’s what I thought. But if your sisters refuse to help you——’

‘Oh, I don’t know what I shall do—indeed I don’t!’ The girl’s eyes filled with tears in anticipation of approaching solitude.

‘I suppose someone in the village would take care of the old lady for a trifle?’

‘Why, there’s Aunt Fanny at Whetstone, she’d take her for five shillings a week and be glad; but we can’t afford that—and me out of work.’

‘But if you found employment—remunerative employment?’

Liz couldn’t speak; the long words or the suspense of hope and fear seemed to choke her.

‘ Say a pound a week.’

‘ A pound a week ?’ Liz gasped.

‘ With a complete outfit, including that becoming costume we have been talking about.’

‘ What do you mean ?’ she asked, coming to the table, and setting her hands upon it as she made the demand. ‘ You ain’t making a fool of me, are you ?’

‘ I wish your hands were a little whiter, and your nails——’

‘ Oh, my hands are white enough when I ain’t got to mess about in cold water, and I can keep my nails as good as a lady’s when there ain’t any fires to make.’

‘ You wouldn’t have to mess about in water or make fires if you could direct servants to do such work for you.’

‘ For Heaven’s sake, sir, do tell me what you mean. You are driving me nearly crazy with these hints.’

‘ This is what I mean, Miss Hardacre,’

said the General, pushing aside his plate, laying his arms upon the table, and bending towards Liz with the most serious expression on his face: 'When we get to the South, I must have some gentle, pleasant young woman to act as a kind of nurse and companion to Sir Henry Harding—one who can see that his domestic comforts'—he might have added 'and mine,' but he did not—'are properly attended to—someone who can stroll amongst the flowers, sit by his side, or, in my absence'—'at Monte Carlo' was also unsaid—'could read to him——'

'I ain't a scholard!'

'Or chat to him about trifles, which would be better,' said the General, repairing his oversight. 'Gossip about the people who pass, the little incidents that occur; take him out for drives in a carriage; find out what is going on at the theatre or the casino, and induce him to go there.'

‘Oh, do you think I could do that?’

‘I am sure you could—if you would.’

‘If I would. Why, I’d give everything I’ve got in the world for such a life.’

‘Well, we can think it over.’

‘Why, it don’t want any thinking about.’

‘Nevertheless, a few days’ consideration will do no harm.’ The General foresaw that his chops would be more carefully cooked for such consideration. ‘If we make up our minds by the end of the week, there will still be ample time to dispose of your mamma and get your costume made. We must certainly have that costume, and for this reason: it will prevent any misconception being set upon your relations to Sir Henry and myself. For it is the most natural thing that an invalid should be attended by a nurse, and so your future prospects will not be endangered by this arrangement.’

Mightily the General cared for the future

prospects of this poor girl, or the consequences to her happiness of this association with Harding! If Denise could be sacrificed to ensure his possession of life's pleasures, what weight would the welfare of a mere servant-girl have in his consideration? Of what earthly good are women if they cannot be turned to the use of man? The best in the land are not too good for his purpose; but a girl of the ordinary servant-girl class—well, as Liz clearly showed, that kind of person should feel only too happy if she could be employed to this end.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEGINNING OF MARTYRDOM.

WITH that determination to 'be good and patient,' Denise returned to the Court, buoyant with hope now that she was unburdened of crushing suspicion, eager to seek the happiest aspect of the situation and find good in everything.

Thrale's guarded acceptance of her views, his reticence and obvious constraint, and his irresponsiveness, chafed her.

'You are not half glad enough,' she said, with vexation. 'You make me feel, Bernard, as if I should like to shake you.'

'Perhaps it's because I have been so

much shaken that I am so dull,' he replied evasively.

In truth, with his foresight of future probabilities, he had little reason to be gay. The General had not attempted to deceive him as to the nature of this expedient for reconciling Denise. It was nothing but a subterfuge—a mere house of cards that must be overthrown by the first breath of truth, and he hated himself for being party to the lie. To his straightforward mind it would have been better to let Denise know the worst, for which the first shock had prepared her, than to foster hopes which must surely be destroyed later on. This seemed to him as cruel a kindness as resuscitating a dead heart only to make it suffer again the pangs of death.

He lunched with Denise, miserably ill at ease, incapable of playing the hypocrite well or of following his honest instincts.

‘You are not afraid of—of anything?’ Denise asked timidly, after a long pause, in which she had vainly been seeking to account for Bernard being so unlike himself.

‘Afraid?’ he replied, in a guarded tone of interrogation.

‘Afraid that the doctor misunderstands dear Harry’s condition?’

‘Oh no; he seems to thoroughly comprehend the nature of his accident. I heard him explaining it to the General last night in almost the same terms that Dr. Arbuthnot used in describing his first accident five years ago. And the treatment he prescribes is exactly the same — absolute isolation and repose.’

‘I will not go to him until the doctor sends to say I may.’

‘That is advisable, however strange and hard it may seem to you.’

‘It should not be either, if I have faith in

the doctor, and surely he must be wiser than I,' responded Denise, employing the argument by which she had succeeded partially in taking a 'reasonable' view of the case, and overcoming her womanly revolt against the enforced separation from her husband in his sickness. 'And two or three weeks is not long to wait,' she continued; 'it will all be forgotten when he comes back to me.'

She murmured a little coo of joy in anticipation of that happiness, when she should have her dear husband once more, and all to herself, to care for and to nurse, as she felt none other could. And then, turning to Thrale with a yearning for sympathy, she was more vexed than ever by his silence and the gloom on his face as he bent over his plate.

'I wish he would go away,' she said in her anger to herself. 'I would ten times rather be alone. How can one be hopeful and

cheerful with such a dreadful wet-blanket upon one? When Harry comes home and finds him here, he will think I wanted him to stay—like a silly girl who is afraid to be left alone.'

It was a positive relief to her when Thrale, looking at his watch, asked if he might order a trap to take him over to the station. She rang the bell at once to give the order.

'Are you going to Ridingsford?' she asked.

'No; to London.'

She was glad to hear that—jealously glad—for if she might not see her husband and watch over him, surely his friend should not. Her feeling of irritation withheld her from asking any questions about his movements, as he offered no explanation; and she said good-bye quite coldly in parting.

But the trap had scarcely started before the revulsion of feeling came, and her heart was wrung by the consciousness of her in-

gratitude to this friend, who had alone stood by her and shared her misery of the preceding day. Why, it struck her now for the first time, he was to have sailed yesterday for India—his passage had been taken a week ago—and without a word, as if it were a matter of course, he had abandoned his purpose for her sake. And now it flashed upon her, with the shock of a sudden awakening, that, finding he was no longer needed, he had taken up his purpose again as quickly as he had dropped it, and was even now on his way to the East—dismissed without one gentle word of gratitude or farewell, never, perhaps, to return—he who, next to her husband, was the dearest friend she had. His depression and silence, which had so unreasonably vexed her, were explained at once. Oh, what a selfish, mean little fool she had been to lose sight of everything but her own happiness! She started to the door

with the hope that he might not be beyond recall—that she might yet beckon him back to acknowledge her faults and beg him to forgive her. But the trap was now far up the avenue, and Thrale, bending his head to meet the cruel wind, did not look back.

The tears of remorse rushed into her eyes, and she furtively drew out her handkerchief to stanch them before re-entering the house. A suppressed titter at her back quickened her jaded spirit like the cut of a whip, and turning sharply, with indignation tingling in every vein, she caught sight of a cluster of servants vanishing out of sight into the service passage ; only one, more impudent than the rest, stood her ground, and, having treated her to an insolent stare, turned with a toss of her head and followed the rest with the haughty carriage of an upper servant.

What was the meaning of this insult ? Denise asked herself as she entered the

drawing-room. How dared these women, her servants, watch her actions and make sport of her unhappiness? What excuse could Evans offer for her effrontery and the contemptuous regard with which she audaciously turned her back upon her mistress? Smarting under the indignity offered her, Denise rang the bell, resolved to have these questions answered at once.

‘Tell Evans to come to me,’ she said, when Mrs. Austin, the housekeeper, appeared.

‘Certainly, my lady, if you wish it ; but,’ closing the door and dropping her voice, ‘if I might make so bold, I would advise you not. Evans gave warning this morning, and she would like nothing better than to openly insult you before all ; and she might say such shocking things, my lady, being very smart-tongued, that I really don’t think you could expect any respectable servant to stay. Jen-

nings and Jane Smith has already given their month's notice.'

'You will pay them their wages and send them away this afternoon.'

'Certainly, my lady; and I'm very sorry, but if you could suit yourself with another housekeeper—you see, my lady, when accidents of this kind happen in a family, our reputation is likely to suffer if——'

'Bring me your accounts, and—and leave the room immediately,' said Denise, choking with humiliation and anger.

For a day and a half they had talked of nothing in the servants' hall but of Harding's mad flight, and the subsequent behaviour of Denise and Thrale. From the butler to the page, the lady's-maid to the scullery-wench, everyone had been gleaning evidence to add to the common store of misconception and wilful misrepresentation, taking example and profiting by the malevolence, maybe, of those

who had not ill-breeding for their excuse. Starting with the presumption that Thrale and Denise were guilty, it is easy to imagine the construction put upon their absence at night, their return together, and the tears of Denise when Bernard drove away. Weak in judgment, strong in prejudice, they in a moment stripped their mistress of every pure and gentle attribute she possessed, and clothed her in the most villainous tissue of infamy their mischievous ingenuity could patch together from the scraps of slander that came in their way.

If Denise had been guilty, if she had harboured only one disloyal thought even, she might have perceived that suspicion lay upon her ; but, being innocent, that was quite impossible, and she could only conclude that rumours circulated in Rockingham of her husband's liaison with Liz Hardacre, and that the idle servants had magnified and

distorted the circumstances attending his accident into some horrible proof of infidelity. That was quite possible ; for had not she herself been misled by those circumstances with the wickedest doubts — doubts which even now, despite herself, were not wholly banished from her heart? It was not for her to undeceive those servants or anyone else who chose to think ill of her husband, for that would have given countenance to suspicion ; but she prayed that he might come quickly back, to prove to all the world that he was her loyal and true Harry.

As soon as Thrall had pulled off his gloves, he wrote to Denise from his hotel in London :

‘ MY DEAR LADY HARDING,

‘ I find I can postpone my departure for a month without inconvenience. This gives me the hopeful prospect of our meeting

again at the Court under the happiest of conditions before I leave England. You will, of course, hear from Harry, and you may imagine what pleasure it will give me to hear good tidings through you.

‘Ever faithfully yours,

‘BERNARD THRALE.’

By return he received a reply from Denise that pained him inexpressibly, such sorrow and humility were betrayed by the touching phrases of regret and gratitude. He seemed to see the writer’s tears; and at a certain point he felt she must have paused to brush them away, and set herself to resume with gentle courage.

But that she should already have to struggle for strength to write cheerfully told its tale.

‘Her martyrdom has begun,’ he said to himself. ‘Where will it end?’

Reason forbade him to go to her—bade

him wait on for the inevitable development which would permit him to leave Denise for ever, or make him more necessary to her than ever he had yet been.

‘If I am wanted, I shall know only too soon,’ he said to himself.

And one day, when he opened a telegram, the following words came to him as a foregone conclusion :

‘I am in great trouble. Please come.

‘DENISE.’

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GENERAL SCORES ANOTHER TRICK.

LOOKING from the window as the train ran into the station at Rockingham, Thrale descried Denise standing on the platform a little apart from the waiting passengers. He had telegraphed by what train he was coming, and was not surprised to see her ; but without that preparation he almost doubted if he should have recognised her, so haggard and ill she looked, so much older for the mental strain of these two past weeks.

‘ He is gone ! ’ she said, with distraction in her voice and in her regard as he took her

hand. 'Gone away,' she added, as if to convey to him more clearly the thing which she herself could scarcely realize.

He passed her hand through his arm and led her up the platform away from the crowd, for her emotion was too violent for restraint, and the tears were now running fast down her wan cheeks.

The Vicar and his wife, old friends, were coming down the platform; they were too close to be avoided, and as they passed Thrale raised his hat. The Vicar kept his eyes fixed well before him, but his wife, in a less Christian spirit, looked Thrale straight in the face, with a drawn upper lip and stony regard, without making the slightest response to his salutation. In astonishment Thrale glanced at Denise; her chin was upon her breast.

'Lift up your head, dear friend; *you* have done no wrong,' he said.

She shook her head, but could not answer him, or trust herself to speak until they had come to the end of the platform. Then, stifling her agitation, and with forced calm, she said, in broken sentences :

‘ I knew you would come, and yet—I did not know. Everyone is against me—and there is nothing to hope for. Must I go back to the Court ?’

‘ Unless you feel the need of a woman’s sympathy. We men are most helpless things, you know. We seldom know the right thing to do or say, and seldomer how to do or say it. How would it be if we went to Mrs. Balfour ? We know she is a good, kind soul.’

‘ Is she, do you think ?’

‘ The best that I know.’

She stopped, and, looking into his face, said :

‘ Then how bad I must be, Bernard : for she will not see me—will not let me speak to her !’

‘Why, what have you done?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Surely there is some mistake in this. Perhaps she was not at home.’

‘No one is at home to me. When not a friend called or sent to know if Harry was alive or dead, I felt I must call on them, to show that Harry had done me no wrong, as I thought. But everyone denied me. And then, when this news came, I went again to Mrs. Balfour, and sent in a note I had written, telling her I was in great trouble, and wished to speak to her.’ The words choked her as she spoke.

‘And then——’ said Thrale gently.

‘And then she sent back my note with a cruel message, saying that she did not wish to see me.’

Thrall led her out of the station in the greatest perplexity. The brougham stood there ; he opened the door with a significant

gesture, and, when she was seated, he told the coachman to drive home, and took his place by her side.

‘Where is the General?’ he asked, when they were on their way to the Court, his thoughts in the midst of this mystery turning to Gordon by some process of natural selection.

‘He came over on Monday. He has been several times. First he came to pay the servants who wished to go. For when I dismissed the housekeeper, I found to my humiliation that I had no money to pay her. You don’t know how they have made me suffer. It was dreadful. They made me feel that *I* was the guilty one. I could not bear it. It seemed such an insult to him—whom I thought was quite good and true to me. All the maid-servants are gone, Bernard; I should have been without anyone in the house if the gardener’s wife had not come in.’

‘But the General,’ said Thrale with tender firmness, hoping to distract her thoughts from these past tortures, and to get to the bottom of the mystery.

‘He came on Monday evening, and, finding me very low-spirited, he stayed till the next morning—yesterday. And he made me so happy! I hardly knew myself when I went up to dress for dinner—I looked quite young again. He told me that Harry was almost well, and that the doctor consented to his coming home, and he asked me if I would go back with him to fetch Harry. And it was as much as I could do to refuse; but I did, thinking it would be better for him, and that he would feel less constraint about—about that woman.’

‘What did the General say about her?’

‘He said she had become very reasonable and good, and consented to some proposal he had made to set her up in a little business.’

‘Did he tell you why she was to be provided for in that way?’

‘No ; but it would have been only right to repay her for—for——’ She hesitated a moment, and then, breaking through her reserve, she said impulsively : ‘Oh, Bernard, I knew it ! I felt that there must be something more than was told me ; but I—I conquered myself, and made up my mind that it should make no difference in my love for Harry—that I would never reproach him, or say a word that should hurt him or remind him of the past.’

Oh, what nights of struggle, and self-suppression, and bending of the knee in submission to cruel injustice, and agony of death and new birth, must have been spent to attain to such resignation, thought Thrale.

‘And,’ he said, taking Denise’s hand in his and pressing it, with the love of a brother in his heart, ‘to take one trouble singly at

a time—and then yesterday morning the General went back to Ridingsford.'

'Yes ; promising he would bring Harry back in the afternoon. And we made the house as bright as if all our servants were about—I and Mrs. Bates ; and I cooked the dinner myself—the things Harry used to like best. And we sat up till midnight, and even then I could not give up hoping, but listened to every sound, and jumped up once with my heart beating awfully, thinking I heard wheels in the avenue—but it was only the wind in the laurels.'

'And this morning, dear friend ?' interposed Thrale.

'This morning a letter came—this,' said she, drawing a limp and creased sheet from her muff, and putting it in Thrale's hand.

He opened it, and, leaning to the window, found light enough to read the General's

fine, bold hand. The letter was dated from the Cosmopolitan Hotel, London.

‘DEAR LADY HARDING’ (the old rascal wrote, clearly foreseeing that it would be read by others),

‘I hardly know how to break the appalling news which I may no longer withhold from you ; and I can only pray Heaven to give you the fortitude to bear with resignation this last and least expected blow.

‘To my consternation, when I arrived at the cottage at the ford this morning, I found every door and window securely fastened, and no sign of any living inmate. They were gone, your faithless husband and the abandoned and crafty woman who has so completely deceived me by hypocritical professions of repentance and pretended willingness to sever her connection with Sir Henry Harding for a pecuniary consideration. As

the truth dawned upon me, and my thoughts turned to you, I could only thank Heaven that you had declined to act upon my suggestion; for had you been with me at the moment, you must have suffered again all the agony you endured a fortnight since, without the consolation of hope which I was then enabled to offer, and I know not what we should have done !

‘There’s truth in that admission, at any rate,’ thought Thrane. ‘The selfish old rascal was more affected by the consideration of his own possible embarrassment and inconvenience than by this poor woman’s agony.’

‘Fearing the worst, I repaired to Dr. Yardley—who will, I am sure, give you further particulars if you wish for them—and learnt from him that half an hour after

I had left Ridingsford to run over to you, Miss Hardacre ordered a couple of carriages to be sent down from the Wheatsheaf ; in one her bedridden mother was sent to a relative living in a neighbouring village ; in the other she and Sir Harry Harding were taken to the railway-station. At Ridingsford Station there was no lack of information. The porters had helped an invalid gentleman out of the fly, and found a first-class compartment in the up-train for him and the young woman ; the booking-clerk said that she had taken tickets for London. What was I to do, my dear Lady Harding ? Should I return to you with these hopeless tidings, or should I pursue the fugitives with a view to making one last appeal to Harding's sense of honour, and retrieving him if possible from the ruin that surely awaits him ? Reason bade me take the latter course, and accordingly I came up to London by the very next

train. Here, however, all trace of these misguided runaways was lost, and, despite most searching inquiries, I have failed to obtain any clue to their movements. But rest assured, dear Lady Harding, that I shall not relax my exertions or abandon this pursuit until I have run Harding to earth, and compelled him, if not to return to you, at least to make such substantial reparation——’

Thrale stopped there.

‘You do not wish to see this again?’ he asked, turning to Denise.

‘Oh, no, no!’ she answered.

He crushed it up and thrust it in his pocket, less disgusted by the old man’s selfishness and shallow pretexts for escaping any responsibility he might have as the nearest friend of Lady Harding’s father—for these were scarcely more than he should have

expected from the plausible old humbug—than astonished by the flagrant indelicacy of one who passed in society as a gentleman, suggesting at such a time as this a pecuniary indemnity to the stricken wife for such misery as Harding had inflicted.

Yet he perceived that the question of a material arrangement must be met before long, and he was not sorry to read the letter Denise found awaiting her when they arrived at the Court. It was from Fielder and Playfair, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn, and ran thus :

‘MADAM,

‘We are instructed by Sir Henry Harding to consult you immediately with regard to a settlement of your claims upon his estate. If you will kindly let us know the earliest date at which it may suit your convenience to see us, we shall wait upon you with the utmost promptitude.’

With Lady Harding's consent, Thrale despatched a telegram at once, saying that she would be at home the following afternoon to receive the solicitors.

CHAPTER XX.

AN APPEAL.

SOON after lunch the next day a fly from Rockingham brought Mr. Playfair and his clerk to the Court, and without delay they were introduced to the library, where Denise and Thrale were awaiting the interview. Denise, despite the fluttering of her heart between a dread consciousness that her fate was now to be sealed, and the ever lingering hope of unexpected reprieve, received the lawyer with unassuming dignity, that was not lost upon the shrewd, observant little man. Oh, if Harry could be redeemed—it had come to that—no one in the

world should ever know of his disgrace through her.

Having discussed the customary generalities with much suavity, while his clerk, taking a seat at the further end of the table, whipped out a stylograph and a quire of foolscap, Mr. Playfair, facing his chair more directly to Denise, said, smoothing one hand gently over the other, and speaking with slow and very distinct articulation :

‘To come to a matter of more serious nature, Lady Harding, permit me to say at the outset I am entirely ignorant of the causes leading to the arrangement we are about to make. Our client, Sir Henry Harding, wished us to understand that those causes, so far as we are concerned, are entirely irrelevant to the transaction with which we are entrusted.’

‘He hadn’t even the common decency to exonerate her,’ thought Thrale, looking at

Denise ; but he held his tongue, divining by the look in the poor wife's face that she would rather suffer by unjust suspicion than have this stranger know of her husband's frailty.

‘That transaction,’ continued Mr. Playfair, ‘is of a purely financial character, and the object in view is to arrive at an amicable, and at the same time legal, understanding upon the question of maintenance. To come at once to the point, madam, we are empowered to meet your demands within any reasonable limit.’

The little lawyer drew himself up and beamed upon Denise, happy to offer so charming a lady such admirable terms.

‘*I* make no demand,’ said she quietly. ‘I ask my husband for nothing.’ And then, as Mr. Playfair raised his eyebrows and fixed his eyes upon his joined thumbs in perplexity at this unexpected contingency, she added in

the same even tone, 'What does he ask of me?'

'Sir Henry makes no stipulation or condition whatever, and I can think of only one decision on his part which can give rise to any objection on yours.'

'What is that?'

'I refer to the decision which involves your change of residence.'

'Do you mean that I am to leave this house—my home?' she asked quickly, her pale cheek flushing with the cruel suspicion that Harry intended to bring that woman here to take her place.

'That, I fear, madam, is a matter of necessity.'

'And what if I decline to go, decline to be turned out like a dishonest servant?' she asked with rising indignation, as that jealous fear rankled in her breast.

'In that case we must apply for further

instructions. Although,' added Mr. Playfair reflectively, 'if you cling greatly to residing here, it might be possible for you to make terms with the purchaser of the estate——'

'Sir Henry proposes to sell up,' Thrale suggested as a clearer explanation.

'Everything ; except, of course, such personal effects as you may claim, Lady Harding.'

Denise looked round her with dismay, her eyes resting on the rows of books in their beautiful binding of ivory vellum, heirlooms of the family that Harry prized so dearly ; on many a rare and costly object they had bought together in their honeymoon, in Florence and Rome and elsewhere, to adorn their home—things that they had admired again and again standing in this old room, hand-in-hand, lovers still. There was no jealousy in her heart now—only dismay and the anguish of irrecoverable loss. Was the

disaster so irretrievable that he could never return? Had he given up everything, abandoned all, in the consciousness that nothing could ever induce him to live again in the old home?

‘Oh, where is he?’ she cried, springing to her feet as if to fly to him.

‘I regret, madam, that I cannot possibly answer your question.’

‘I must see him—indeed I must,’ she entreated.

‘I can only repeat, with great pain, that I am powerless to help you.’

‘Oh, Bernard, this must not be!’ she cried. ‘We must not let him carry out this hasty project. Think how proud he is of the old house and all the dear things in it, all that he has inherited from generations and generations—he, the last of all the family; think how bitterly he will regret this when—when—when he is better and strong again.’

'Think, sir,' she added, turning to the little lawyer with humble pleading in her voice, her melting eyes, her outstretched quivering hands, and the very carriage of her body—'think, sir, my husband and I have never had a bitter word—no, not one unkind word or one ungentle glance since we were married. And that is only a few months. We were married in June. It isn't possible that he can give up all he loves and prizes for ever, and go away never to come back. He has had an accident, and there has been a little trouble since. Nothing so great that we should live ever more strangers to each other—nothing that may not be forgotten soon.'

The lawyer shook his head despondingly—a few guineas for this journey and that speedy conclusion of the transaction were not what he looked forward to.

'Tell him, sir,' continued Denise, 'tell him

that you found me very reasonable—that I am not so foolish a woman as he thinks, and that I may grow wiser still as I get older. Tell him I agree to everything except this—and this chiefly for his sake. Ask him to stay only a little while before he sells his old home, and the beautiful trees, and all the things he was fond of. A few months will make no difference. And see, I will give him a proof how reasonable I can be. I will go away from here to-morrow, and never come back till he bids me come. I will leave everything—mine as well as his. I will take nothing at all, to show how certain I am that he will come again and send for me.’

‘Perhaps, madam,’ suggested Mr. Playfair, ‘if you wrote this touching appeal in a letter——’

‘Why, so I will. I never thought of that. I will go to my room and write it now, and you will take it.’

‘ With the greatest pleasure.’

‘ And you will take no action until you have his answer ?’

‘ Certainly not.’

‘ Oh, thank you. I will not be very long.’

And the poor little soul hurried from the room, convinced that at last she had hit upon the reasonable thing to do.

‘ It can be only an infatuation,’ she said to herself, as she ran upstairs ; ‘ and if his love for me was no more than that, why, then he may outlive this second as he outlived the first. Nay, he must wish for me a little. Our hearts have beat together. He can’t forget me altogether.’

As she sat down to write her letter, Thrale took a sheet of paper and delivered himself of his feelings :

‘ For God’s sake be a man, Harry, and not a contemptible cad. Think of this dear little

wife of yours overcoming every feeling of resentment and jealousy, hiding her own griefs and your fault to keep an opening for your escape from this dishonourable situation. Think not of the few weeks of unhallowed pleasure before you, but of the years of bitter repentance that must follow, of the degradation and humiliation to which you are willingly subjecting yourself. Think how truly and tenderly this wife has loved you, how bravely for your sake she is now suffering martyrdom, and think of the ruin you bring upon a gentle soul whose only fault is that she loved you too confidingly. Think how the woman suffers in the position you impose upon her ; how pitiless the judgment of society is upon the woman parted from her husband, how unjust the sentence, and how terrible the penalty exacted. Rouse yourself, get out of this horrible mess by one vigorous effort—if not for the sake of poor

Denise, for your own. I say nothing of myself save that I hope to grasp your hand as I've grasped it before when you've done the right and plucky thing, and say again, "Well done, Harry!"

‘BERNARD.’

The two letters were duly forwarded to Harding, Hôtel Meurice, Paris. He, utterly careless whether letters came or not—only praying that he might not be troubled by any reference to that which he wished buried in forgetfulness—very willingly relegated to the General all correspondence that was necessary with his lawyers; and the General, still alert to the ticklish tenure of his prosperity, kept a sharp eye on the postman, and when Mr. Playfair's letter came, enclosing those from Denise and Thrale, and asking for instructions, the General read all, dropped two in the fire, and poked them well between

the blazing logs, and simply replied to the lawyer that Sir Henry Harding saw no reason for altering his decision or replying to the letters enclosed, and that he desired Harding Court to be put up for immediate sale without any further delay.

CHAPTER XXI.

ONLY A LITTLE CAST-OFF WIFE.

A WEEK elapsed before Denise heard from Harding's solicitors—a week of deferred hope for her, so exhausting in its effect that her overstrained and wearied spirit seemed to have lost its susceptibility to joy or pain. When the letter came, saying that 'Sir Henry Harding saw no reason to alter his decision, and desired his affairs to be wound up without further delay,' she read it almost apathetically.

'There is no hope now,' she said, putting the letter in Bernard's hand.

He had foreseen this for the past few days,

knowing that if Harry's heart and conscience were to be touched at all, his first impulse on reading his wife's letter would be to telegraph at once and end her suffering.

He laid the letter aside, but held the hand that gave it in his, as he said :

‘We must think of him as one that is dead.’

‘Oh, if he were I could still love him—I should cry to think of him, and ease my heart. But see, my eyes are dry, my tears all dried up, and I feel that something has gone from me, here, here,’ said she, pressing her breast—‘something good and sweet that can never come there again. It is love that is gone—love that used to make me feel that God was there and would never let me do a wrong thing to anyone on earth.’

Oh for a woman's tongue to soothe and console, the intuitive power to strike some sympathetic chord and fill this mute soul with

tender harmony ! Thrale could think of nothing but platitudes, wholly inadequate to express his feeling of pity and commiseration, which, indeed, were inexpressible.

‘Every bereavement must leave us with that sense of void——’

‘But not this sense of degradation,’ she retorted quickly, ‘not this feeling of cruel injustice that makes one’s brain swim with a craving for revenge; with thoughts of murder and reckless wickedness. Oh !’ she cried, springing to her feet and snatching her hand from his passionately, ‘I am afraid of myself. You do not know how bad a woman I may be.’

‘I know how good a woman you have been,’ he said, rising and going to her side, ‘and I know that no one can do wrong who has struggled so bravely to do right.’

He led her back to her seat, and she made no resistance, exhausted now that the

paroxysm of passion was past, and he sat beside her, taking her hand again, saying what he could to tranquillize her.

‘Love and hate, grief and joy, all have their seasons, and none lasts for ever. The fiercest storm is soonest over, and happily the darker days are fewer than the bright in our little year. These dull clouds look as if they would never lift, don’t they? yet we know that before long they will break, and the sun will shine down and warm the whole world into flower and song again.’

In this strain he talked on for some time, quite careless whether the thing he said was sensible or not, only conscious that if it did her good it was worth the saying; and she would now and then look up into his face with wondering gratitude in her eyes and a fluttering sigh, moved not so much by what he said as by the feeling that she had yet one friend who cared for her.

‘I don’t know whether you’re aware, my lady,’ said the gardener’s wife, entering the room after a discreet knock and a pause, ‘but the gentleman as brought the letter is a-waiting for an answer.’

‘I will bring it to him presently,’ said Thrale, and, taking up the lawyer’s letter, he glanced down the pages.

After signifying Harding’s intentions, Mr. Playfair wrote :

‘In accordance with our client’s instructions, we shall proceed at once to put his estate upon the market. Our Mr. Watson, the bearer of this letter, is empowered to render your ladyship every assistance in the removal of such personal effects as you may wish to reserve, to discharge all outstanding obligations, and to close the house as early as it may be convenient to surrender possession.

‘With regard to the question we had the honour to discuss with you on the 18th inst., we beg you will let us know with as little delay as possible your estimate of the amount which should be placed to your credit at our bankers’, resting assured that we shall be pleased to meet any reasonable demand on your part.’

Dropping the letter on his knee, Thrale turned to Denise.

‘I will go away to-day,’ she said with feverish haste, anticipating the question on his lips, ‘and I will take nothing that he has ever given me—nothing! I will go away as poor as I came. See, this is the dress I wore before I was married—this poor frock that he used to admire.’

She had worn none other for the past week, and this perhaps with some sentimental notion that when Harry came back

it would recall the old time and revive the old love.

‘ You are quite sure——’ Thrale said, rising.

‘ Quite, quite,’ she answered passionately. ‘ He has treated me as if I were not his wife; but the shame of it shall be his, not mine.’

Thrale inclined his head and left the room. He ordered the brougham to be brought to the door, saw Mr. Watson, and then with thoughtful consideration sent the gardener’s wife to fetch Lady Harding’s hat and mantle from her bedroom. Returning to Denise, he found the poor woman near the door, her hand resting upon the wall for support.

‘ I am so weak, so weak,’ she murmured faintly. ‘ Yet I am doing right, Bernard, am I not?’

‘ I would not have you undo anything,’ he answered. ‘ Take my arm—so. Now we will walk up and down a bit; that will give

us strength. It was certain to be a hard wrench at the last.'

'I—I couldn't find courage to go upstairs for my things.'

'That's all right ; Mrs. Denham has gone for them.'

'You seem to know just how I feel, and yet I am so contradictory to myself, wavering between one thing and the other. I know I must go. I know I could not stay here ; and yet it is all so unreal, so difficult to understand, that I am to forsake all the past and begin a new life.'

'It will be easier by-and-by. I have ordered the brougham.'

'There's poor Sandy barking. Does he know that his mistress is going to leave him, I wonder ?'

Mrs. Denham brought in her things, and at a sign from Thrale withdrew quickly. He put the mantle on her shoulders, and she

pinned her hat and drew the gloves upon her trembling hands as best she could. Soon after that the carriage wheels scrunched in the frost-bound drive, and Denise, pressing her lips closely together and lifting her drooping head, rose and took Bernard's arm. Looking neither to the right nor left, but walking as if in a trance, she passed through the hall and crossed the threshold of her lost home. The collie in the yard howled piteously—as dogs are said to do at the approach of death; and Denise wished it might be the end of her own miserable life that was so heralded.

They had left the Court some distance behind them, when Denise broke the long spell of silence that had fallen upon them.

‘Where am I going?’ she asked in a wondering tone, which showed that the question had but just dawned upon her.

‘I have told the man to drive us to Rockingham. Whether you stay there or not must depend on your feeling.’

‘I have not thought of it. There were so many things to think of—greater than what is to become of me.’

‘To me that seems the greatest of all,’ he said gravely.

She laughed hysterically.

‘Why, I am nothing—a little cast-off wife, that’s all. Who cares what end I come to?’

‘I do.’

His tone abashed her, and she hung her head, conscious of her ingratitude to this generous friend.

‘Is it nothing to me whether you sink or swim, whether you throw up your arms and go down, or reach the firm earth by a brave effort? I do not doubt which you will do—nor you either, deep down in your heart.

You're not a coward, nor a useless little member of society.'

She passed her hand through his arm, and pressed it, to show that she was not really ungrateful ; then, after ruminating silently on his words and taking a practical view of them, she said :

' I'm not sure that I *am* a useful person, Bernard. Of course I must earn my living somehow, now that I have nothing in the world. I must do that ; I *couldn't* rely upon other people's charity—I mean kindness.'

Thrale nodded with a smile of encouragement, happy to find that he had struck the right chord this time.

' Besides, I should like to work, so perhaps, after all, I am a useful person at heart. I have done it before, you know. Why, when I was fourteen I kept mother. Only then it was different. I don't think I should like to go on the stage now, even if

they would have me, and I scarcely believe they would, because I am getting so ugly and dull. Still, there are other things a woman can do. The worst of it is I know so little, and there are such a lot of governesses wanting engagements. I don't think I'd better try for that, do you ?'

'Well, perhaps there are rather too many incompetent persons in that line of industry,' Thrale observed.

'I could be a nurse, or—or a general servant—only not in Rockingham, Bernard. I should not like that.'

'That is the first point to settle. We ought to make up our minds in the next half-hour whether you would care to stay in Rockingham under any conditions or not.'

'*Ought* I to stay there?' she asked, after a few moments' reflection upon the opening duties of her new life.

‘That depends upon whether you feel like fighting.’

‘Fighting?’ she echoed, wondering what line of industry might require ability of that kind in a young woman of her age.

‘You see, Denise,’ Thrale explained, ‘now there is no longer any justifiable reason for leaving society in error, it might be advisable to reveal the whole truth—to stay in the place, and show these scandal-mongers, who have turned their backs upon you when you needed a friend, that they have shamefully wronged you—to stay here until they were forced to acknowledge their injustice and beg your pardon. That’s what I call fighting—and that’s what I should do if I were in your place.’

He thrust out his prominent under-jaw, and bent his brows in savage determination. In the past week he had fathomed the mystery easily enough, and learnt why

Denise had been deserted by every friend. For her sake, and in view of Harding's possible return, he had not attempted to undeceive anyone, knowing that if Harding came back the innocence of Denise would be amply shown. So far as he himself was concerned in the scandal, he cared not two pins whether these fools, who were so easily led by mere rumour, held him innocent or guilty. But it was another matter when the reputation of Denise was at stake; and for her sake he was prepared to take up his abode in Rockingham, and prove her innocence by every means that ingenuity and determination could afford.

‘I don't feel that I could do that, Bernard,’ said Denise presently.

‘If you go away, they will say you were afraid to stay.’

‘So I am.’

‘They will take it as another proof that

you were to blame. Heaven only knows what stories they may not invent. They may say that you were turned adrift for some abominable fault——’

‘What does that matter if I have done no wrong?’

‘It means that they will do you all the injury they possibly can. There is no limit to the cruelty of civilized society. The barbarians who stoned unhappy women to death were more merciful.’

‘But Rockingham is only a little place in the world——’

‘On the other hand,’ continued Thrale, ‘there would be not much difficulty in tackling the Vicar to begin with. He would be bound to make some effort to assert Christian justice. Then there’s Mrs. Balfour; we could make her listen——’

‘And suppose, Bernard, that we told this horrible story everywhere, and forced every-

one to acknowledge that I have done no ill ; what then ? Do you think I want them to pity me ? Oh, that would be more terrible than anything ! If Mrs. Balfour asked me to be her companion again, do you think I could accept ? Oh, no, no, no !

‘ It isn’t their compassion we want, but it’s decent fair play and common honesty,’ said Thrale, his jaw standing out more fiercely than ever.

‘ Bernard, I’m only a weak little woman, remember.’

‘ That should be a stronger reason for fighting your cause. But it’s not. No, you’re right ; we must do what is expedient, not what is quixotic ;’ and, dropping the glass, he thrust his head out of the window and told the driver to go to the station.

CHAPTER XXII.

EXPEDIENCY.

THE subject was not reopened until they were in the train and on their way to London. But the thoughts of both were occupied in seeking a solution to the difficulties that environed them, Thrale's revolving round his own text—'We must do what is expedient.' At length Denise said timidly :

'If you are going to India, Bernard, and you did not mind, I should like to go there, too.'

He looked at her without speaking, smiling at the idea that he might object to her being near him.

‘It would be as easy to find an occupation there as in London, I should think,’ she continued.

‘I dare say it would; but we must first earn the money to pay for the journey. I am not much richer than you. See’—emptying his purse in one hand and displaying a few sovereigns—‘that’s all I have.’

‘Oh, Bernard, why did you come first-class?’

‘I don’t mind showing you,’ he said, disregarding her question, ‘because——’ He paused, and, jingling the gold in his hand as he looked at her, asked: ‘Do you know anyone in London?’

‘Nobody.’

‘You haven’t a single friend there?’

‘Not one.’

‘Nor I, so you see there must be a good deal of mutual dependence between us. That’s why I thought you ought to know the limits of my funds. We shall have to scrape

and economize to rub along until we are earning the living wage.'

'Won't you go to India?' she asked brokenly.

'Alone!—not I. And what would you do in London without a friend?'

'But you had an appointment there.'

'That fell through last week. There was another man in the field, and they couldn't wait for me. It's all the same; I can earn as much in London.'

'But you were so eager to go—so enthusiastic about India. We couldn't persuade you to give up the idea.'

'I suspect I am capricious. Anyhow, I don't want to go now. Come, let us think of something more serious,' he said abruptly, feeling that Denise was stepping upon dangerous ground, and might conceive the truth, that his eagerness to leave England had been due to consciousness that his love

for her was not otherwise to be overcome.

Detecting the shade of embarrassment on his face, and misconstruing it, she drew closer to him, and, laying her hand upon his arm, said timidly :

‘I can’t be unselfish just now, Bernard—not unselfish enough to ask you to go away, just as if nothing had happened to me. I know it’s for my sake you are staying. It isn’t caprice. You couldn’t be capricious. It’s all pity for me. And, oh, I am so grateful! But after a little while, when I get better and stronger, I can bear to let you go.’

‘We will hold together till then,’ said he, with more fervour in his voice than he had yet permitted himself. ‘When I know quite well that you can do without me, I will go—but not before.’

She did not perceive the deeper meaning of his words—love of the kind he felt being

banished from her heart ; she saw only the staunch affection of an exceptionally loyal friend.

‘It’s more than friendship,’ she said ; ‘if you were my brother, you could not be more kind.’

‘I’ve been turning over that idea of a fraternal relationship,’ he replied, with a marked absence of enthusiasm. ‘It’s the only way that I can see of getting over certain difficulties in our way.’

‘I don’t think I quite understand——’

‘You see, Denise,’ said he, separating the pieces of gold in his palm with one finger, ‘there’s only about seventeen pounds here ; they wouldn’t last long in a hotel—about a week, I should say. Whereas we might live in decent lodgings fairly well on four or five——’

‘Oh, less than that,’ she said eagerly. ‘You don’t know how economical I can be.

Oh, Bernard !' She paused, clasping her hands, for the thought of having him with her, of their sharing the same home, brought a gleam of sunshine upon her future, which she feared must presently be overclouded and lost.

' It could be managed if we palmed ourselves off as brother and sister—not otherwise, I'm afraid.'

' But if I feel that you are a brother to me, and if you could think of me as a poor unhappy little sister, is there any harm in it? No one is any the worse for thinking we are related.'

' We'll try it, anyhow,' said he more cheerfully, and with resolution. Then he slipped a few sovereigns into his pocket, and putting the rest of the money back in the purse, gave it to Denise, telling her it was for her house-keeping expenses. She took the money without remonstrance, only wondering sadly

why the project of living with her as a brother was repugnant to him. For she knew he must love her, and with all a brother's affection.

He also asked himself why the notion was so distasteful. To meet her when he came from his room in the morning, to spend his hours of leisure with her, to bring a smile back to her face from time to time—these were the dearest desires of his heart.

Was it merely his hatred of falsehood in any shape, his scorn of expedient as a cowardly evasion of responsibilities, that created this unpleasant feeling? He thought it must be that. For the possibility of divorcing Harding and of making Denise his wife had not yet occurred to him. Had any idea of that kind presented itself to his mind, his feeling would have revolted against it as an outrage upon delicacy.

This was a season of mourning for him

equally with Denise; they had yet to bury their dead, yet to forget their all-absorbing grief, before they could foster thoughts of love. But for all that, at the root of his discontent was the fear that he could never be anything more than a brother for Denise.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CHANGE IN DENISE.

By the end of the week Thrale and Mrs. Harding—they thought it advisable to drop her title now—were comfortably installed in a pleasant suite of rooms upon Putney Common.

‘To-morrow,’ said Thrale on Sunday, ‘I shall go out and look for work.’

‘I think I can make my dress and things in a week,’ said Denise; ‘then *I* must begin to look about for employment.’

‘You’ll never stand in need of employment while I’m in the house; I want such a lot of things, and never know where to find what I

want. When we can afford to keep a house-keeper and a couple of servants, it will be soon enough for you to turn out of a cold morning, and drudge all day, and come home fagged out at night.'

'But our money, Bernard——'

'Don't you know the proverb?—any fool can make money, but it needs a wise person to spend it. I'll make the money, and you shall spend it, and save and save and save to your heart's content. And in that way, with the content of doing our best, we must grow rich beyond the dreams of avarice, contentment being a blessing that avarice never can dream of.'

It was late when he came home the following evening, but he carried a bundle under his arm, and was in high spirits.

'There's a week's work to begin with, and more to follow. No ; it's not washing,' he said, as Denise touched the packet inquisi-

tively. 'I'll tell you all about it when I've had something to eat.'

'Are you hungry?' asked Denise, ringing the bell.

'As a hunter should be. And if I weren't, your table would make me hungry. Why, where did you get your flowers?'

'In Putney. I got all these, and those on the chimney, for fourpence.'

He declared they were worth four shillings, and then, looking about him, fell to admiring everything silently as he pulled off his gloves—the table laid with scrupulous care, the glasses glittering brightly—he knew she must have given them an extra polish with one of her new dusters—the sprays of flowers here and there, the glowing fire—and never a cinder on the hearth—the easy-chairs drawn round towards the fire, suggestive of a long after-dinner gossip; and lastly his eyes rested upon Denise as she brought him a

pair of new slippers that had been toasting on the fender for the past two hours, and, seeing a happy smile in her face, he breathed a long sigh of contentment.

‘And now tell me what is in the parcel,’ Denise said, when his appetite was somewhat appeased.

‘Manuscripts. Oh, I’ve been wonderfully lucky ; and this is a day to be pricked out on the calendar. Happened to fall upon just the right sort of man—which was the more delightful because I had previously dropped on five or six of the other sort—Knight, of ——, the big publisher. A man after my own heart, clear-sighted, bold, and kindly ; a man who looks you straight in the eyes, and makes up his mind there and then whether you are to be trusted or not. Exceptional men take unusual courses. He had written to me once expressing his approval of certain critiques on his firm’s books

which appeared in the *Herald*. They were honest critiques, I'll say that for them. And when I introduced myself this afternoon as the writer of those articles, and asked for employment as a reader, he offered me half a dozen manuscripts to read and report upon for a fee of half a guinea each, short and long. You may be sure I said snap, and there they are.'

'Then, you won't have to go away every day? you can read them here?'

'If I may.'

'Oh, that is beautiful! You shall have this room, and I can work in the little room.'

'I prefer the small room, if it's all the same to you. Genius wants a lot of tobacco-smoke, and wants it thick.'

When he came down the next morning, he found that Denise had prepared the small room for his use. A fire was burning brightly ;

a table and chair were placed in the very best position for light and warmth ; his pipes and tobacco held an important place beside the pile of MSS. ; and a narcissus stood in a glass to gratify his eye. Denise stood with twinkling eyes, pleased with her effort to please him. Turning to her, he said tenderly :

‘ You are awfully good, *dear*. ’

The word escaped him unconsciously. Many a time it had risen to his lips and been repressed ; but the impulse just now took him off his guard.

She smiled gently. The term of endearment was grateful to her ear. Why should they repress sweet words if they really felt towards each other the tender love of brother and sister ? It was quite natural and right. One day he would kiss her, and that would make her happier still. She would know then, indeed, that he loved her as his

sister—loved her as much as she loved him.

He began work that morning in the little room. He did what he called tough stuff here. But often he would bring a manuscript in the sitting-room, and read it aloud to Denise while she worked. He had the true scent of a born critic, and at a glance could tell if the work was readable and pleasant, or not.

‘You’ve only to thrust a paper-knife in the middle and sniff it, to know whether the stuff is good or bad,’ said he.

Those were pleasant times for Denise—the pleasantest possible for one in such a position as hers. Her thoughts could not stray away when he read, as they would when she was simply cutting out or stitching alone. He read well, and compelled attention by sometimes breaking off to ask her opinion on a certain passage, or to discuss

some doubtful point, declaring that she could see straight to the root of a thing while he was wandering amongst its branches, and so made her feel that she was actually of use, and some sort of a helpmate.

To him these days were pregnant with such happiness as he had never before known. It was no longer a Dead Sea fruit that played before his hungering eyes, but a rich growth, as sweet as it was beautiful, ripening surely to its full perfection.

Sometimes, when she had bidden him good-night, he would thrust aside his 'tough stuff,' reserved for night-work, and, turning to the fire, would light a pipe and dream of the future. And now it was that the thought of a divorce came, not indelicately, into his mind. It was absurd that Denise should be tied for life to a stone. In a few months' time, perhaps in a few weeks, it might be suggested to her that she should

free herself from the man who had proved himself utterly unworthy of her consideration. And after that, though Denise might not love him as she had loved Harry, she could yet in time consent to become his wife, if only to put an end to this sham, which must prevent them forming any friendships with other men and women of their own class. But he hoped for something more than that ; he hoped that her affection would ripen into such a passion as he himself felt for her, and trusted to the effect of time and her healthy organism for this result. A long time, he knew, must elapse before the memory of Harding could be effaced, before her stricken heart recovered its normal faculties, and her nature yearned for the fulfilment of its natural functions. But he was in no hurry ; he had so long kept his feelings under restraint that he could trust himself not to be betrayed into any premature declaration of his passion,

knowing that, if his feeling was not reciprocated, and Denise felt she could not become his wife, they must put an end at once to the present arrangement, which was such a happy one for both, and separate, to the loss of each. He preferred that the development of love on her side should be gradual, and come within the natural course of events, rather than it should be forced to a measure which might take the form of self-sacrifice, from a sentiment of gratitude on her side.

The result seemed to him assured, if only Denise could recover perfect bodily health, the physical strength to meet the moral strain which had yet to be borne. He saw that her cheerfulness was mainly assumed, that many hours of agony were concealed, for his peace of mind. Her wan face and sunken eyes in the morning showed only too clearly the suffering of the long night. Could she sustain this effort? Must there not come a time when

exhausted nature should call for repose, and her faculties succumb to the unnatural pressure put upon them?

With these fears ever on his mind, Thrale watched his companion with intense anxiety, concealing his solicitude for fear of precipitating a climax. He saw her once, when she believed herself unobserved, press her hand upon her heart, and bow her head in pain. On another occasion her hand trembled to such a degree that she almost let fall the breakfast-cup she was taking from him; her lips were livid; beads of perspiration stood upon her temples, and she abruptly left the room.

Then, on Sunday, as he was reading aloud the last of the week's MSS., he was suddenly dismayed by hearing a faint cry, and before he could render her assistance, Denise had slid from her chair, and lay to all appearance dead upon the floor. He rang the bell

violently, and applied such means of restoring life as he could think of. When she returned to consciousness, she was unable to explain the cause of her fainting ; she had only felt a sudden pain—at her heart ; that was all, and it was nothing. Thrale would have gone at once for a doctor, but she entreated him so earnestly not to do so that he refrained, upon her promising to see him if she were again attacked. She seemed quite herself the next morning—so well that Thrale left her after lunch to take his week's work to the publishers and get more.

Denise watched him as far as the end of the street ; then, having put on her coat and hat, she walked into the Richmond Road, where she remembered having seen a red lamp over a doorway, and a brass plate on the gate, with Dr. Somebody engraved upon it. And now, finding the house, she rang the bell timidly, and asked to see the doctor.

The interview that followed was not a long one, but it marked a new era in the life of Denise.

She said nothing about this visit to Thrale, for it was a subject that she could not talk about even to her brother.

‘I am quite, quite well,’ she said in answer to the earnest inquiry with which he greeted her on his return; and holding his hand in hers, she looked in his face with unwonted animation as she continued: ‘I am not going to be foolish again. I won’t make you anxious about myself any more, my poor Bernard.’

Indeed, a noticeable improvement dated from that day—a change so great that it perplexed Thrale. No effort was necessary now for her to take interest in ordinary topics. On the contrary, she seemed at times to be holding fluttering excitement under control, and the apathy of previous

days was replaced by subdued vivacity. Her busy fingers were never idle ; it delighted Thrale, looking up from his work, to observe the look of concentration and strenuous energy in her face as she plied the needle. But he put his veto on working after dinner, with the result that on going late to bed one night, and pausing by her door, he heard the rapid click of the needle within. The next morning he remonstrated with her.

‘I must get that horrid frock done and out of the way,’ she said.

‘But you said it was for spring, and that is still far ahead. And it’s horrible to think of you sitting in the cold working as if it were for life.’

‘I like the cold ; but I won’t work in my room if you don’t like it.’

He bound her to that promise, but the work was more engrossing than ever in the sitting-room. One day, when he entered

abruptly from his room, she huddled the work up in her lap with a cry of alarm, and laughingly begged him to go back to his den again only for one minute. What on earth was she at now ? he wondered.

She astonished him one night, when they were sitting before the fire, by opening the subject of divorce, after a little interval of silence, and quite irrelevantly to the matter they had been discussing.

‘I don’t think a woman ought ever to give up the hope of reclaiming a husband who has left her. For her children’s sake,’ she added, by way of explanation, as Thrale made no response to the proposition.

‘But if she have no children?’ suggested he.

She made no answer to that, and he promptly turned the subject.

Yet it recurred to his mind more than once, and he wondered what she could have been revolving in her little head before she

made the observation. It was not long before he found the clue to that and other little mysteries which had puzzled him in the past five or six days.

Needing a pair of scissors to cut out an extract, he went one morning into the next room to borrow them from Denise. She had just left the room to give orders to her landlady about dinner ; so, finding no one there, Thrale lifted the lid of the work-table to help himself.

‘What in the name of wonder can this be?’ he asked himself, taking up a very diminutive garment in cambric. For a moment he thought that Denise must be dressing a doll for her landlady’s child ; and then light suddenly flashed upon his clouded masculine mind, the thing being too big for a doll—it was for a baby.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DENISE PLAYS HER CARD.

THAT look of concentration and energy of purpose in Denise's face was not without significant result. When business again took Thrale to the City, she profited by his absence to find her way to Lincoln's Inn. There she was fortunate enough to find Mr. Playfair.

‘I am most happy to see you, madam,’ said the little lawyer when Denise was seated in his sanctum. ‘For the past fortnight we have been endeavouring by every possible means to learn your address——’

‘Does my husband want to see me?’ asked Denise eagerly.

‘No, madam; we have not had the pleasure of receiving any communication from Sir Henry; but, in justice to our client, we are most anxious to conclude this affair in the manner he desired. In fact, we feel hardly justified in making any definite disposition of his estate until your claim is settled, either’ (ticking the points off on his thumb and forefinger) ‘by your signed agreement to renounce all pecuniary indemnity—the verbal intimation conveyed to us by our Mr. Benson—or by fixing a reasonable estimate in round figures of the maintenance to which you feel yourself entitled.’

‘I want to settle that question personally with my husband.’

‘That, madam, I fear, is quite out of the question.’

‘I *must* see him. There are grave reasons—reasons which he is unaware of.’

‘I shall be happy to represent them to our

client ; but I can offer you no hope that any advice on our part will induce him to see you.'

Denise reflected for a moment or two, and then, producing a letter she had written to Harry, pouring out her soul with such fervid eloquence as comes to the most simple at such times in an appeal to him to return to the right path, not for her sake, but for the honour of the child which must bear his name, she gave it to Mr. Playfair, and asked when she might expect an answer.

'Well, I should say in about a week's time.'

'Then, he is not in England,' she said sharply.

'I make no admission, Lady Harding ; the law is tedious, you know.' He displayed all his false teeth in a smile intended to charm her thoughts from that admission he had made. 'And even if our client were in the next street, I could not undertake to obtain his answer to this important letter without

due consideration. I promise you this : it shall be forwarded without delay, and if you will kindly give me your address——'

'No ; I will come again next Monday,' said Denise, and then, though Mr. Playfair made a movement as if to close the interview, she sat thinking hard for a minute or two. She was no longer a girl ; she was a woman, and with the probability of becoming a mother, she felt she must be very careful about worldly things, and do nothing foolish.

'Have you sold Harding Court ?' she asked presently.

'Not yet. We are pushing the matter forward, however. Our surveyors have sent in their report ; an inventory has been made of all the furniture and effects in the house, and we have arrived at an approximate valuation of the estate.'

'Will you please tell me how much the Court, with all that it contains, is valued at?'

‘I think I may give *you* that information, although it is scarcely regular. With the home-farm, park, house, furniture and effects, the value may roughly be set down at fifty thousand pounds.’

‘How much does he possess besides that?’ asked Denise, after a moment’s reflection.

‘Really, madam,’ remonstrated Mr. Playfair, ‘I must decline to answer that question. I have already overstepped, I fear, the limits imposed by professional confidence. If I can serve you in any other way——’ He laid his hand upon the door-handle.

Denise rose, considered well whether she had said all that she intended to say, and then, promising to call the following Monday for the reply to her letter, went her way.

That earnest, passionate letter, written carefully after so much forethought and mental conflict, came duly into the General’s hands, was read by him in the smoking of

one cigarette, and answered in the smoking of the next.

And so, when Denise came again to Lincoln's Inn, Mr. Playfair was enabled to tell her that his client had written to acknowledge the receipt of her letter, and inform him that, as it contained nothing to change Sir Henry's views or call for further consideration, he must beg that the negotiation should be closed without further waste of time in unnecessary correspondence.

She was not unprepared for this answer, but its cold cruelty shocked her and stirred up all the bitter resentment of which her sweet nature was capable. That she should have knelt at the feet of this man, who had proved himself so heartless and wicked, that she should have broken down her pride, obliterated the memory of the wrongs she had endured, overcome her self-respect, humbled herself in the dust as if she were

craving pardon for herself rather than opening a way for his redemption, and for this unmanly and inhuman wretch, whose debased soul was dead to honour, to duty, to purity—dead even to the tenderest appeal in nature, the voice of his own child! Oh, it was shameful and degrading!

With these thoughts surging upwards for utterance, she would not trust herself to speak after the lawyer had delivered his heartless message, but sat with bent head and lips tightly pressed, as if to repress the words that must betray her husband's dishonour, whilst he sorted his papers noiselessly, regarding her from the corner of his eye.

‘I think,’ he observed quietly, after a time, and still fingering his papers—‘I think we must take this letter as final, Lady Harding, the ultimate decision on our client's part.’

Denise drew a long sigh as she raised her head and turned to the lawyer.

‘Yes, yes,’ said she ; ‘I have done all that I will—all that I can do.’

‘In that case,’ said he with alacrity, taking a dip of ink and flourishing his quill over a quire of foolscap, ‘we may be able to settle at once the question between us.’

‘Yes ; I have made up my mind how much I must have.’

‘I am most delighted to hear it. Now,’ taking another dip and another flourish, ‘now, what shall we say, in round figures?’

‘Fifty thousand pounds,’ replied Denise without hesitation.

The roundness of these figures took Mr. Playfair’s breath away.

‘You are not speaking seriously, madam, surely. Perhaps, under the influence of momentary irritation, you are disposed to assess your claim at a higher figure than you would upon calmer consideration.’

‘No ; I have been thinking about it all

the week, and that is the sum I demand.'

'But fifty thousand pounds, my dear Lady Harding, think! It's an enormous sum of money.'

'I'm very sorry,' said Denise—and she really seemed to regret the pain she was giving the little gentleman—'very sorry indeed; but I could not possibly do with less.'

Mr. Playfair laid down his pen and joined his thumbs, reflectively shaking his head. Denise wore the plain hat and coat she had bought as being more suitable to her present condition than the rich fur-trimmed mantle and bonnet in which she had left the Court. Why such a plain little person could not do with less than this sum perplexed him.

'Have you considered that the interest upon this sum at five per cent. gives an annual income of two thousand five hundred

pounds? Now, allowing for your position and the cost of living, do not you think you might make, say, a thousand a year do? That would be a sum down of twenty thousand——’

‘Oh no; I couldn’t possibly do with anything less!’

‘Well, madam, you must allow me to communicate again with our client, for, although I am instructed to close with any reasonable demand, I should not feel justified in settling the case at such a cost as you indicate.’

‘Then, what am I to do?’ asked Denise.

‘In the first place, you must allow us another week to obtain instructions from our client, and then, if his reply proves unsatisfactory, I should advise you to take the advice of a solicitor.’

Denise rose, thanking Mr. Playfair, and promised to act upon his advice.

The next letter from Harding's solicitor that fell into the General's hand drew a long whistle from his lips.

'Fifty thousand! Why, that's about half the estate. Greedy little beggar! Fifty thou.—a modest demand, upon my word, Madame Denise! Well,' thought he, after a restorative nip of cognac, 'I don't blame her for feathering her nest, and I don't think I begrudge it her, either, for she deserves her share in the plucking of the pigeon.'

CHAPTER XXV.

MONTE CARLO.

DENISE astonished Thrale one Monday evening at the close of the month by asking if he knew of any solicitor in their neighbourhood.

‘A solicitor, Denise?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, what scheme are you working out now in that busy little brain of yours?’

‘I want to buy Harding Court, that’s all. Only I don’t see how I am to buy it myself.’

‘I should think not. First of all, you have to find the money.’

‘I’ve got that, dear,’ said she, with a triumphant little nod; and, opening her

purse, she drew out the cheque she had received that morning from Mr. Playfair.

Thrale examined it with increased amazement.

‘Why, when did you receive this, and who gave it you?’ he asked.

Then she told him of the steps she had taken, which she had concealed from him at first from motives of delicacy—the cause was now no longer a secret between them—and afterwards from the fear that it might come to nothing, and so create solicitude on his part without reason.

‘But it was all settled this morning,’ she said in conclusion; ‘and when I told Mr. Playfair what I intended to do with the money, he said he should be happy to negotiate—that’s the word—negotiate with my solicitor.’

‘You wonderful little woman!’ said he, regarding her with warm admiration, for his

imagination readily supplied the details in this transaction which she, from modesty, suppressed. 'And what are you going to do with the Court when it's bought?'

'Of course I don't think of living there; that would be foolish. And, oh, I wouldn't change this little home for that great house, not for all the riches in the world, unless——' she paused, twisting her fingers within each other, as was her habit when uneasy speculations came into her mind.

'I know,' he said, waiving the subject. 'Do you know how much the Court will cost?'

'All that, I think—fifty thousand pounds!'

He nodded, and was silent in thought.

'Not alone,' she continued, reverting to her former train of thought—'nor even with my dear brother—I couldn't live there. It isn't for myself, dear. But I thought that if anything happened to me it would be a provision for the—the little one. And I thought

that I ought to do this when *he* showed so clearly that he had no care at all what became of either of us. And I thought,' she proceeded, with a little wavering in her voice, 'that, if it should be a son, it would encourage him to work very hard and make a fortune, thinking the Court would be his ; and one day he might go to live there, and win everybody's love, and restore the honour of the family that has flourished there so long.'

Thrale saw the tears of pride, and hope, and joy, springing in her eyes, but dimly, for the moisture gathered in his own, his heart being touched with love and sympathy.

'It will cost a good deal to keep up,' he said huskily, to turn the subject.

'I have thought of that, Bernard,' she said, her newly-born business instinct pricking into activity. 'Evans, who rents the ten-acre farm, offered quite a great deal—I think it was a hundred and fifty a year—for the

home-farm, which joins on, you know. And I should say that would pay for repairs and things.'

Thrale nodded.

'I'll hunt up a solicitor to-morrow,' said he.

'You see, dear,' said Denise, after a pause, drawing a little nearer to him, and laying her hand on his arm, 'there's no knowing what may happen. Perhaps, if he'—she could not bring herself to name her husband otherwise—'if he is led away by bad people, and spends all his money, and is deserted by them, he may one day be glad to come back to us.'

'That is not unlikely,' said Thrale; and then they both looked into the fire in silence and thought.

He knew well enough now that this noble little lady by his side could never be nearer to him than now—a sister, and no more. He had been a fool to dream anything other,

and had wronged her devotion and steadfast, clear-sighted conscience by conceiving that she would ever give up the hope of reclaiming her husband. And already she foresaw the inevitable end—the return of the ruined blackguard whining for mercy; and she would show mercy who had received none and be generous and self-sacrificing to the very end.

Could nothing be done to help this brave little woman—to ameliorate her fate by only one degree? Must Harding sink to the lowest depth of infamy before he could be taken back by his wife? If he could only now be set upon his legs, morally, the case would not be so wretchedly hopeless. Thrale thought that if he could only get hold of him for an hour he might yet do something with him. ‘If it were only to give him a d——d good parting kick, it would be something!’ thought he, shoving out his lower jaw.

‘You’ve never had a word from that old rascal Gordon, I suppose?’ he said at length.

Denise shook her head.

‘Don’t know where he is to be found?’

‘I—I think he said he was going to Monte Carlo.’

‘That’s it!’ said Thrale, slapping his knee. ‘I warrant he’s there gambling with somebody else’s money. You told me, I think, that it took a week to get a reply to your letter.’

‘Yes, dear. Why?’

‘If the General’s at Monte Carlo, I feel pretty sure he’s got Harding with him.’

‘But he slipped away in the General’s absence.’

‘Never mind about that. It’s just possible the old man found him again. Any way, it might be worth while finding out.’

‘Would it be of any use to write to him at

Monte Carlo, with the chance of the letter reaching him ?'

'None at all, I should say,' answered Thrale, knowing that if the General were there with Harding any intimation of their suspicions would only cause him to decamp at once.

'Do you think, dear, I ought to go there?' Denise asked, when she had overcome the repugnance which she felt at the first prospect of such an expedition.

'No. It's a forlorn hope at the best—the barest chance of taking them by surprise and matching craft by craft—an enterprise which I could not suffer you to undertake, even if there were a reasonable hope of succeeding. You have done enough in all conscience—more than enough ; it's my turn to do something.'

'It would take time and cost a great deal, wouldn't it, dear ?'

‘Not more than we can afford. Less than we would give for the peace of mind it would yield us to feel that we had left no stone unturned. And if even at the eleventh hour we could rescue him——’

‘Oh, if we could!’

‘We will think about it, Denise; a day or two’s delay can make no difference.’

She took his hand and held it, pressing it gently, in recognition of his dear brotherly love, for she knew that he had made up his mind to go before he allowed himself to suggest the possibility.

On Wednesday he started for the Riviera, with all his travelling requisites in a hand-bag that was already half filled with the manuscripts he took to read on the journey. At the last moment Denise put a letter in his hand, saying it was the only part she could take in the Forlorn Hope. To his surprise,

Thrale found that it was addressed, not to her husband, but to the General. Personal inquisitiveness was the least attribute of his nature, yet Thrale wondered more than once what argument Denise could bring to bear upon the time-serving old scamp.

Recollecting several instances of her reticence with regard to him, her invariable silence when he had expressed his opinion in outspoken terms upon the General's shifty and untrustworthy character, he was disposed to think that she still believed him to be a gentleman, and her friend. Was this an appeal to his friendship in the name of her dead father? he asked himself. Probably it was.

About five o'clock on Friday afternoon he arrived at Monte Carlo. Leaving the Casino and the great hotels behind him, he worked his way towards Monaco till he found a hotel more in harmony with his limited

resources. There he took a room, and, having refreshed himself with a wash and a fairly good dinner, he set out for the Casino with such feelings as many another experiences whose fate may be decided by the chances of that establishment.

A train from Nice was just in, and a crowd of visitors were streaming in by the broad steps. He joined them; left his hat and overcoat in the cloak-room, obtained a card of entrance to the gaming-rooms at the office opposite, and passed into the spacious atrium. A compact crowd waited at the entrance to the Salle de Théâtre; a scattered throng of well-dressed men, with a sprinkling of over-dressed women, were sauntering up and down.

Thrale ran his eye over the crowd with little expectation of finding either the General or Harding there, and made his way to the gaming-room. At the entrance he

asked the man who inspected his entrance card if he had seen General Gordon enter, on the chance of his being a well-known habitué.

‘Général Gordon,’ repeated the man reflectively ; and then, with a shrug and an amicable smile, he added : ‘Mon Dieu ! Il y a tant des Généraux.’

It was a busy night at the Casino ; the players stood four deep round the roulette-tables ; the hot atmosphere was charged with an odour peculiar to these rooms—the smell of greasy bank-notes, cosmetiques, and stale scents. Above the hushed murmur of the crowds rose the metallic click of gold and silver under the croupiers’ rakes, the rattle of the ivory ball in the roulette, and the monotonous call of the chefs, ‘Faites vos jeux, messieurs ; rien ne va plus,’ and the numbers which disposed of a fortune at each coup.

Thrale took the tables systematically, scanning carefully the serried faces of the players that surrounded one, and then passing on to the next. It took him over an hour to get through the roulette-rooms. Coming to the Grande Salle, where trente-et-quarante alone is played, the task became easier, the players being comparatively few ; yet here it was easy to overlook even a well-known face amongst the continually shifting outer ranks of players, and it was difficult to get a fair view of those seated at the table. Indeed, he had come to the last table, and in despair was thinking of going back to the roulette-rooms and beginning all over again, when he heard a well-known voice just in front of him say ' Assuré,' and, craning forward, he recognised the General's long, hooked nose and white moustache as he pushed a piece across to the croupier.

Thrale drew a long breath, and, working

his way to the opposite side of the table, found a better point of observation. It was he, the General, beyond a doubt, and looking remarkably well, his dark hair lustrous with health and hairwash, his white moustache looking more princely now for a Russian twirl. He was in correct evening dress, and a superb diamond glittered upon his finger. Piles of five-louis pieces served as paperweights to a couple of bulky packets of notes, and he had a gold pin to prick off results upon his card. The coolness with which he saw his five notes of a thousand francs raked into the bank three times in succession was only equalled by the indifference with which he added twenty notes of the same value to his stock on the fourth coup. He was in fine fettle, magnificent, and Thrane, in despite of himself, could not help admiring the old vagabond.

But where was his pigeon, Harding, who

must, at least, have given the needy General the means of starting upon this royal road? Thrale examined every face at the table with scrupulous care, and then, having no anxiety with regard to finding the General again, left him, and passed the other tables under review.

‘He’ll never look as he did,’ thought he with a pang; but he could find no man that bore any resemblance to Harding, nor any woman that looked like Liz.

So at length, giving up his quest, he went back and kept his eye on the General. A little after ten the General looked at his watch, put up his notes and card in a case, slipped the gold in his pocket, and rose from the table. With his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, his head well up, and an amiable eye for the handsome women in his passage, the General was sauntering towards the entrance, when Thrale, coming to his side,

his square, protruding chin well in evidence, said :

‘ Good-evening, General.’

The General, pulling up sharply with a kind of who-the-deuce-are-you look, faced Thrale for a moment, and then, recognising him, took his hand, held it stiffly, drawing back as if to show all the world that he was not ashamed to acknowledge a friend, however humble, and gave it two hearty shakes, saying in his deepest and chestiest voice :

‘ My dear boy ! This is indeed an unexpected delight, and an ample compensation for a deuced bad night. But whoever expected to see you here ? I thought you gentlemen of the press, whilst very careful to give the latest betting at Newmarket, usually condemn this honest establishment as a sink of iniquity.’

‘ Our practice, General, usually runs counter

to our theory,' observed Thrale, who was prepared to make himself agreeable—to descend, in fact, to the most jesuitical expedient for the sake of Denise.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GENERAL FINESSES.

‘WHERE are you staying, my dear chappie?’ asked the General, taking Thrale’s arm as they descended the Casino steps.

‘Hôtel du Midi.’

‘Hôtel du Midi! That’s odd. *I* know it well. Alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘No engagement to-night?’

‘None.’

‘Then you must consider yourself my prisoner.’

‘Willingly.’

Thrall did not intend to lose sight of the

General if he could help it until he had solved the question that had brought him so far.

‘I am staying at the Hôtel de Paris, just across the *place* there. The charges are stiffish, you know ; but it’s exceedingly convenient, and the *chef* is a *cordons bleu*. We will have a nice little supper, and then, with a cigar on the terrace, afterwards we can talk over certain matters that are the fly in my pot of precious ointment. We won’t spoil our appetite by discussing serious subjects now. So you’ve been saying at the Hôtel du Midi, dear boy ?’

‘I arrived this afternoon.’

‘Oh, oh!’ thought the General—‘didn’t lose much time in hunting me up. I see your game. What a strange thing!’ said he at the same time. ‘That’s the very place I pitched upon when I first arrived. To tell you the truth, dear boy’—dropping his voice

to a whisper—‘I was in a fearsome pickle. Hadn’t ten pounds to change at the bureau, I give you my word, and that wasn’t my own. You see, that poor miserable beggar had made me paymaster, and when he eloped he left a balance of about twenty pounds in my hands. Half of that went in hunting about for him in London and getting here. With the remainder I began punting five-franc pieces at roulette—a detestable, degrading business—dirty little shopkeepers, fat Jewesses, seedy riff-raff of all sorts, reaching over your head, breathing garlic into your face, scrambling for their money like dogs for a bone, quarrelling, pilfering, and smelling—— Pah! Well, I had to put up with that. Couldn’t afford to go in for a system, you know—you understand the tables——’

‘Not a bit,’ replied Thrale in a tone that implied ‘and I don’t want to.’

‘Ah, ah!’ thought the General. ‘Obviously he hasn’t come here to play. All right!’ And he said: ‘Nearly all are forms of the Martingale; but I dared not venture even on the “Simple Philibert,” so I played on zero.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Simplest thing in the world, dear boy! The roulette is divided into thirty-seven compartments, each numbered from zero upwards. The ball is bound to fall into one of those holes. On an average the ball falls into zero every thirty-seventh coup. Then the bank has to pay the winner thirty-six pieces for every one he has on—see? My plan was to wait until the twentieth coup after zero had won. The ball may tumble in the very first time, in which you make a clear profit of thirty-five pieces. If it doesn’t you lose your piece and stake another, and so on until it does win. Beginning at twenty, it is exceedingly rare that you can lose thirty

times before zero wins ; but if you do, your gain is still six pieces. As I tell you, I began with a single piece of five francs ; but I was lucky, and at the end of the week I could afford to put on four at each time, and so I crept on until a week ago, when I was in a position to turn my back on that perspiring crowd of little punters, and go into the respectable rooms and play in the society of gentlemen. And now, dear chappie, I've got hold of a system—— Well, you shall know all about it presently. Here we are.'

The hall porter flung the doors open on seeing the General and Thrale, another attendant came forward to take their hats and coats, while a third brought some letters from the bureau for M. le Général.

'I wager three out of these five are begging letters. Will you take me, dear boy?' asked the General, offering the unopened letters. 'Not on—wise on your part—you've no idea

what a lot of that sort of thing goes on here. Oh, Jules,' presenting the letters—of which one, as he perceived, was actually from Liz—and turning to the hall porter, 'you will send up to the Hôtel du Midi for Mr. Thrale's luggage—arrange the affair—and if the room next to mine is unoccupied, Mr. Thrale will use it while he is my guest.'

'The orders of M. le Général shall be obeyed.'

Thrale submitted to this arrangement : not that he had any hope now of finding Harding here. Indeed, so completely had the General's unconstrained behaviour disarmed him, that he began to think the old fellow was playing honestly for once in his life. He was never more in error.

With the nice refinement of a man who respects a delicate repast, the General avoided the discussion of lengthy topics, serious matter, and even the all-engrossing theme at

Monte Carlo—rouge-et-noir—during supper. Drawing out his companion, as much as it was possible with one so moody, taciturn, and hard to draw as Thrale, he kept up a running conversation, seasoned with pleasantries, upon such trifles as harmonized with the light dishes and the sparkling wine.

It was only when they were seated in the moonlight on the terrace, with a shaded lamp that never flickered in the still air, lighting the facets of a dozen cut caraffes and glasses on the table between them, with the scent of lemon-blossom and a thousand flowers floating up from the gardens below, and with an exquisite cigar in his lips, that the General, expelling a cloud of smoke with a deep sigh, said :

‘Now, old chappie, you must tell me what you know about that poor beggar Harding, and his dear, good little wife.’

‘I know nothing about him.’

‘I was afraid so. Do you know, dear boy, it struck me just now that perhaps you had come down here to look for him?’

‘I have.’

‘No go,’ said the General, with a melancholy shake of the head; ‘he knew *I* was coming here.’

‘A suspicion of that fact led me to believe he would be found at Monte Carlo,’ replied Thrane bluntly.

‘I wish your conclusions were justified, with all my heart. There would be some hope for the poor old Johnnie then. Why, dear boy, I’ve seen men here hopelessly entangled, tottering on the very edge of social destruction, all for some pretty doll with a painted face—mad, positively mad. Well, they have gone into the Casino, lost a few thousands, and that’s brought them to their senses. Away goes the doll—and they’re cured.’

‘And they go back to their innocent wives,’ thought Thrall bitterly, ‘and are forgiven ; and one’s the hero of a farcical comedy, and the other the heroine of life’s tragedy.’

‘Ah,’ continued the General, ‘you moralists magnify the small iniquities of this place, which any sane man must see are not a patch upon the rascality connected with your sacred turf, nor one-thousandth part so destructive to the general community, and you lose sight altogether of the many advantages derived from it by a deserving section of society.’

Saying this, the General thrust out his legs, tilted back his chair, and, plunging his hands into his pockets, turned over the thick, heavy five-louis pieces lovingly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ANOTHER TRICK TO THE GENERAL.

‘It has occurred to me,’ said the General to Thrale, when they met the next morning at breakfast, ‘that if Harding is here we ought to find his name in the visitors’ lists.’ He broke off to order a waiter to fetch *all* the local papers in. ‘When I am at the tables (and I do my two *séances* regularly) I see nobody but the chef and the croupiers, so it’s not impossible that he is here.’

The garçon brought about as many papers as he could carry.

‘Good. Set them down there. Now fetch me the *Indicateur de la Riviera*. That,’

he explained to Thrale, 'is a sort of directory published every month, and comprises a list of visitors at all the stations between Cannes and Vintimille. We will go through the lot methodically presently.'

And this colossal task he attacked after breakfast with the greatest equanimity, and certainly with less despondency than Thrale. They found no Harding at Monte Carlo, but the General spotted out a Miss Harding at Villefranche, a Barclay Harding at Nice, a Mrs. Harding and family and suite at Grasse.

'I should try 'em all,' he said. 'There are such lots of misprints in these papers. But before you leave Monte Carlo I should go to the Bureau de Police and make inquiries. The hotels, you know, are compelled to furnish exact lists of all visitors. And then there's the Consul. I'll go with you if you like—he's a capital sort of Johnnie, and will do all he knows to help you.'

‘Thanks, I’ll call on them,’ replied Thrale gloomily. ‘I won’t trouble you to come ; I shall do this ferreting quicker alone.’

‘If he’s here, or anywhere near here, you must find it out before we meet at lunch.’

Had there been the least prospect of finding Harding, or of discovering treachery on the General’s part, Thrale would not have scrupled to avail himself of Gordon’s hospitality. But he saw no ground for hope in any direction.

‘Thanks again,’ said he ; ‘but I don’t think you will see me again.’

‘Dear boy,’ said the General impressively, dropping his voice, ‘permit me to take the liberty of an old friend—how do you stand for cash ?’

‘I’ve a hundred francs, that’s all.’

‘Thought so,’ said the General to himself. ‘Glad to hear it.’ To Thrale he said, in the same genial, earnest tone : ‘My dear chappie,

you will lunch with me—twelve sharp. After lunch we will go into the Casino for just half an hour.'

'I've no time to lose, nor money either.'

'I promise you shall lose neither. I promise you that you shall win in three hours more than any literary man can make in three years. You shall return to England with a fortune in your pocket——'

'Or to hell, with such as you,' thought Thrale, with some strange instinctive conviction that this apparently harmless old rascal was in truth a fiend possessed of the power to ruin the souls of men and women.

'I have a system,' pursued the General, 'a kind of Martingale——'

That dispelled the uncanny illusion—if illusion it was—and Thrale burst into laughter at the fatuity of the General.

'Why, you all have systems!' he cried. 'And the Casino profits by them. Good

heavens, General! don't you know me a little bit?'

'More than you think, perhaps. Well, dear boy, if you will not suffer me to do the thing more delicately—allow me to offer you this.' And with that he drew the stuffed note-book from his breast-pocket and extended it to Thrale.

'Hang it, sir! what are you thinking about?' asked Thrale, rising indignantly.

'I am thinking, my dear fellow,' replied the General, unmoved and as bland as before—'I am thinking that, with a hundred francs, you can no more go to Villefranche, Cannes, and Grasse, than you can fly to the moon in search of Harding; that, with a hundred francs, your inquiries must come to an end in less than a week.'

'Then I must give up the search.'

'No,' said the General in a very low and serious tone. 'No; you can't do that if

you had—as I must suppose you had—good reasons for believing that Harding is hereabouts. You are bound to pocket your pride—and this,’ laying his hand upon the note-case. ‘Mr. Thrale, this search is undertaken, not to save Harding, but to serve that poor little wife he has forsaken.’ As Thrale made no response, he continued, after a pause : ‘You think I have no conscience.’

‘I won’t flatter you by supposing you overburdened in that particular.’

‘No. Nevertheless, I have something within me that serves the same purpose, call it what you please—something that makes me feel more or less satisfied with myself. I don’t feel satisfied with myself when I think of Lady Harding.’ He paused, leaning forward and looking straight into Thrale’s eyes with consummate audacity.

‘I don’t exactly know what you could have done for her,’ Thrale observed.

‘It’s all right,’ thought the General; ‘she has not let the cat out of the bag.’

‘You might have *tried* to do something, certainly,’ added Thrale.

‘*That* is exactly what I feel, dear boy. I might have stood by her until my twenty pounds were all gone. What I should have done after that heaven only knows. Certainly I should not be in a position to offer her now this little provision—and that is what my roundabout journey ends in. Hear me out. You told me last night that she is well, and that you know where she is. Take these notes, employ them as you think best in hunting up that poor weak-kneed Harding, or in supplying the personal wants of that poor soul, his wife. I will not take a refusal,’ he pursued, as Thrale rose again with emphatic refusal in his look and gesture—‘at any rate, you must give my offer consideration. I shall expect to see you at lunch.’

‘And if you do not see me,’ answered Thrale, ‘you will know that no consideration can induce me to take your money, even for Lady Harding.’

The General felt that he had gone dangerously near overdoing it. ‘A little more, and he might have taken the money,’ he reflected ; ‘but I was compelled to pitch it strong. He is pretty sure to tell Denise all about this interview ; she won’t see through it. There’s no amount of generosity that a woman will not credit you with if you give ’em a fairly plausible reason for it. Keep her in good temper—that’s the main thing just now.’

The General lunched alone ; he did not expect for one moment to see Thrale again. But he sent a note to him at the Hôtel du Midi, *after* the last train had left Monte Carlo for Paris, and when the garçon brought it back, with the information that Mr. Thrale

was not there, he tipped the man a louis in the fulness of his heart.

He took an early train to Mentone the next morning, to look after his dovecote, as he put it to himself, and make sure that his pigeon was not flown.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL.

FROM the station at Garavan, the General walked to the Villa Bella Vista, a beautiful house surrounded by palms and citrons embedded in flowers, garlanded with roses and gorgeous creepers that twined to the uppermost columns of the belvedere. It stood in the furthestmost corner of the Bay of Mentone, where the stream that divides France from Italy falls into the sea. The proprietor, an English lady, having taken a disgust to it after a very disastrous series at Monte Carlo, had readily accepted Harding as her tenant, handing over her servants with the

rest of the chattels for the season, at a reasonable price, with the stipulation that the transaction should not be made known to all the world by the visitors' list—a stipulation which the General, who had the arrangement of affairs, most righteously observed.

The General liked exercise in moderation and under agreeable conditions ; it steadied his nerves for play ; and as he walked along in the generous sunshine, with a sea of liquid jewels on one hand, the olive-clad foot-hills of the Alps on the other, and the white campanile of Bella Vista just showing above the palms and eucalyptus, he experienced that feeling of good-will towards all men which comes with self-contentment.

If he could not make everyone in the world happy, it was only because his means were limited by circumstances over which he had no control. What he most dearly wished

was to make poor Harding happy and comfortable in his present position—so happy and comfortable that he could never wish to change it for any other. That note from Liz, written, doubtless, in a moment of irritation, to which young women of her class were only too subject, saying that she could ‘not abear it any longer,’ and he must come home and do something quick, did not disquiet him greatly; he felt so sure that, with a little tact, he could do something to make her life as happy as she wished.

There was a billiard-room in the belvedere. The windows opening upon the arcade surrounding it were thrown open to let in the air, fragrant at this hour with heliotrope; the pure blue of sky and distant sea was panelled in a frame of yellow roses and crimson passion-flowers, twining together on the slender columns of the arched way. Leaning on his cue, his chin resting on his hands,

Harding listlessly regarded Liz as she screwed her pliant body about, in the endeavour to make a stroke that might hit something.

‘Not that way, my dear.’ said the General, entering. ‘You can’t hope to hit a ball by making a sort of knife-rest of your knuckles in that style. Show her how to hold her hand, Harding.’

Harding did as he was bid, setting his own hand on the board in regular form ; and then, finding that she could not copy, he drew near lethargically, and bent her fingers to the requisite position. At the touch of his hand, the rich blood rushed up to the girl’s temples, and she glanced swiftly into his face, her eyes twinkling, as if dazzled with their own brightness. He, as heavy as lead, saw nothing but the set of her fingers, and, having done the best he could, he told her phlegmatically to ‘fire away.’

Liz's cue, as might be expected, slid along the side of the ball, and, with a cry of vexation through her set teeth, she stamped her foot upon the floor.

'What a funny chappie you are!' remonstrated the General. 'How can you expect the girl to play if you don't show her how? She's standing right in front of her ball; slant her body round a bit.'

Again Harding did as he was requested, putting his hands upon the girl's waist and shifting her position, all as if it were a tiresome duty; while she, crimson again to the roots of her pretty hair, and quivering with sensibility, bit her under-lip till it was white as her little teeth.

'That's better,' said the General; and he seated himself, with a rest in his hand, to mark the score and keep the game going.

He stayed to lunch with them, and was,

as usual, very chatty and entertaining, relating the latest incidents of the Casino and the current scandal with an enviable lightness of touch and good humour. After lunch he took coffee with them on the terrace, and when his cup was sipped and settled with a glass of liqueur, he found it was time to catch the train, and return to his beloved Monte Carlo.

Leaving them and passing through the salon, he deliberately laid his gloves on the table; then, descending to the garden, he stood under the terrace and called up to Liz:

‘Will you see if I left my gloves in the salon?’ said he, as the girl looked down from above.

‘Yes, here they are; I will bring them down,’ she called, understanding now the significant movement of his eyes as he bade her good-bye.

The General met her at the door, and, linking his arm in hers, led her down the path towards the gate.

‘Well, what is it, eh, my dear girl?’ he asked, with paternal gentleness.

‘Why, you see what it is!’ she answered fiercely. ‘He don’t care for me a little bit—he never alters—and I—I—well, I can’t bear it any longer!’

‘Hum; case of Pygmalion and Galatea reversed.’

‘It’s no good talking to me about people I don’t know!’

‘Pygmalion was a sculptor—a man who made images,’ he said, bringing himself down to her level. ‘And one of these images was life-size and uncommonly good-looking, like you, my dear, and this Johnnie falls madly in love with her——’

‘Yes, that’s it!’ she cried, comprehending the parable. ‘It’s just like loving and loving

a dead thing. Oh, it's maddening! What became of the gentleman?'

'He would have gone mad, only he found means to put warmth and life into the image, and then it was all right, you know.'

Liz looked puzzled, taking the case literally, as a fact of to-day.

'I've done all I know,' she said presently. 'I never cross him. If I can think of anything to amuse him, I fetch it. What else can I do?'

The General cast a sidelong glance at her, raising his eyebrows, and, as that failed to awake her intelligence, he said:

'My dear, if he won't make love to you, you must make love to him.'

Liz regarded him in perplexity for a moment; then, his meaning becoming suddenly intelligible, she snatched her arm away, and turned her back on him. The General struck a vesta, lit his cigar, and, seeing by a

glance over his shoulder that the girl had seated herself on a marble bench with her shoulder turned towards him, he left her to come to her senses, and marched on with a light heart to the station.

Finding him gone, Liz began to hope she had not offended him ; for, after all, there was no great harm in what he said, only for the moment it had offended her pride. She had seen ladies carrying flirtations to desperate lengths, and if it was not wrong in them, why should it be wrong in her ? Servants and ladies were women all the same. The General had spoken in a friendly way. He was very clever, and, somehow, whatever he did or advised always turned out right in the end. And if it turned Sir Harry from a stone-cold image, like, into a loving man, and put feeling into his heart, would he not be happier and better for it ? Oh, for that—to make him loving, and cheerful, and natural

—she would do anything, anything, anything! With these thoughts stirring her blood like strong drink, she started up from her seat and hurried into the house. But before going on to the terrace, she stayed a minute in the salon to overcome the giddiness of this intoxicating passion, and moderate the beating of her heart. Then, before her resolution could fail, she stepped out upon the terrace, to find Harding, with his head sunk in his shoulders, asleep in his chair.

She seated herself silently opposite to him, and leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, and her damp hands glued together, she wondered what it was she loved ; why such a passion had sprung out of her compassion for this man. When he lay helpless and broken down in his bed he was interesting, but now he was a mere log, and, with his mouth agape and his cheeks scored with

dull care, not even commonly good-looking. Liz had had a score of sweethearts in her time—good-looking, cheerful fellows, most ; yet she had never felt for one of them one particle of the passion that throbbed so wildly in her bosom now. Many a gentleman visitor had made her presents, squeezed her hand on stairs, kissed her in passages, and even written to her. She had only to glance at any man to make a fool of him. Yet, beyond the mere triumph of making her fellow-servants laugh at the expense of these ‘silly fools,’ she had never cared whether she excited their admiration or not ; but now here was she ready to lay down her very life for this one who had never shown a sign of love for her. Maybe that was the secret spring of her passion, his indifference provoking that craving for the unattainable which is inherent in our nature.

Suddenly, Harding’s head falling back, he

awoke with a snort, and, rubbing his eyes, he looked stupidly about him.

‘Anything at the theatre to-night, Liz?’ he asked presently, yawning.

‘“Madame Favart,”’ she answered, her resolution failing utterly under these discouraging conditions.

‘Seen it a dozen times. Let’s go for a drive’—standing up and stretching himself—‘a good long un. I’ll go and see about the carriage while you put on your bonnet. Order dinner as late as possible, that’s a good girl.’

He hated the evenings and the long nights, when there was nothing to distract his thoughts; when, do what he might—pace the room, plunge his head in cold water, smoke, lie which side he would—back would come the past with its tormenting suggestions of what *might* have been had he only done this or that to keep his wife’s love from

straying. For she had loved him, he knew that, before they came back from their honeymoon, and fell in again with that cursed false friend.

They drove to Vintimille and back ; but somehow Liz failed to find courage to execute her project—it may have been the necessity of effort that chilled her. And after dinner they strolled along the sea-front, Harding making the moonlight and the citron-scented air a pretext for escaping yet another hour the horror of retrospection, and yet Liz could not summon the hardihood to put her thoughts into words, her purpose into action ; only, when they said good-night in the vestibule, she retained his hand for a moment after he would have withdrawn it, looking into his eyes with such fervour in hers that he could no longer ignore their testimony. She ran away from him with a little hysterical laugh, and he looked after her with a curious

awakening of his senses; he noticed the swish of her white-frilled petticoat and the twinkle of her pretty feet as she ran upstairs, and when she reached the landing, he saw her turn boldly round and wait there with a significant smile in her face. He nodded awkwardly, like a boy, and went out into the garden.

He paced the alleys, thinking now not of the past and its possibilities, but of the present and its facts. Liz was in love with him—him of all men on the earth! This, then, was the explanation of many a lingering look and trembling touch that he had attributed to sympathy and pity. She cared for him in another way, and now some new sentiment with regard to her seemed springing in his breast—something that gave him unwonted interest in her, a feeling of carelessness that had long been unknown. What if he let this sentiment grow and take the place of morbid regret, putting the past from his

memory and opening up a prospect of indifference and pleasure? Why should he live with the dead when the living stood there with open arms to breathe a fresh life into his dormant soul? Why should he spend sleepless nights brooding over the lock of brown hair and the tattered letter of one who had betrayed him and broken his heart, when he might sleep and forget, and dread the night no more?

He went indoors presently, still feverishly agitated. Before the room in which he usually passed the lone hours, he hesitated. Should he go in there to-night, and try to read the book that lost all meaning to him after the first few paragraphs, where in every line he seemed to see the name of Denise; or should he go upstairs, where he knew Liz was waiting for him? He sickened at the thought of again going through that bitter mockery of attempting to forget, and, glanc-

ing at the stairs, his imagination turned to Liz with a quick sense of relief.

For a minute or two he stood irresolute, shaken by the undefined conflict of good and evil principle within him ; then some glimmering perception of consequences dawning upon him, his heart sank with a feeling of self-loathing and disgust, and, pushing the door open, he entered the solitary room, crying hoarsely, ' No, no !'

What was it caused this sudden revulsion of feeling ? Some clinging memory revived by the vision of tender caresses that conjured up a chilling comparison of Liz with the wife to whom he had given all that was in his heart to give ? Or was it some nobler and less selfish sentiment, the last flickering light of honour, of manly regard for the weak, of chivalrous respect for purity ?

There were writing materials on the table. He snatched up a pencil, and wrote a few

hurried words to the General, telling him to make a suitable provision for Liz's future, and send her home to her friends in England. In a postscript he intimated that he might be found at Nice when Liz was gone. He put the letter in an envelope, addressed it to the General, and left it where it must be found ; then he went out of the house quickly and away from it—never looking back, lest he might be tempted to return.

When the General came in after midnight, Liz herself gave him the letter, and waited silent and trembling to know what it contained. The General ran his eye over the page, tore off the postscript, and handed the letter to Liz without a word.

‘Where is he gone?’ she gasped as the paper dropped from her hand. The General shrugged his shoulders.

‘To-morrow,’ said he, ‘we will look for him at Monte Carlo ;’ he had already decided

that the easiest way of curing Liz of one passion was to excite another. 'If we don't find him there, we may take it for granted that he has gone back to his wife.'

For a week or so Liz was seen at Monte Carlo, where she attracted a good deal of attention by her prettiness and the bizarre contrast of her demure dress with the feverish recklessness of her play. And then—she disappeared.

Poor Liz! If you have drifted into the sea of lost souls, 'twas by no fault of the man you loved so passionately. If you still live, you must think kindly of him who would not do you wrong!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ROAD TO DESTRUCTION.

WHEN Liz was no longer in the Villa Bella Vista, to make life endurable, a substitute had to be found, to prevent Harding going melancholy mad or blowing his brains out in sheer desperation. The substitutes proposed by the General were all rejected by Harding : he himself proposed the remedy.

‘ Play seems to agree with you,’ said he.
‘ I’ll try how it goes with me.’

The General reluctantly admitted that he knew of no better means for curing a man of morbid sentiment. The idea had occurred to him long ago ; but the practical applica-

tion he postponed as long as possible ; not because he was of that greedy and short-sighted class of bloodsuckers found at Monte Carlo and elsewhere who regard every newcomer with jealous hatred, as a possibly lucky player and a rival who may rob him of his substance—he was far too generous and philosophical to entertain such mean sentiments—but simply because the existing state of things was so extremely pleasant that he did not wish to change it for any other.

Moreover, he had the true gambler's superstition about changing of luck ; and his luck might change in leaving Monte Carlo. For it was evident that if Harding was to play it must not be there. The season was now in full swing. Every day fresh crowds were pouring into the Casino. Harding might be recognised at his very first *séance*, and then any disaster might be possible.

‘ M—yes, old chappie,’ said he reflectively.

‘On the whole, I think it about the best thing we can do. A man can’t play and mope at the same time. But we won’t stay here. We’ve had enough of this place.’

‘Yes ; now there’s no Liz about, the house is like a sepulchre. I never knew how much she was to us till she went away.’

Already he began to think he had behaved like a fool in that affair ; he came in time to regard it as the silliest thing he had ever done in his life.

‘And we won’t play at Monte Carlo,’ pursued the General with a sigh. ‘There’s such a herd of second-rate persons there, and they are so aggressive and so rude. It’s like a tramcar ; you have to fight for a seat, and when you’ve got it, you find you’ve a pick-pocket on one side and a woman who eats peppermint on the other.’

‘Anywhere you like, only, for Heaven’s sake, let’s get out of this sharp.’

They left Mentone the next day, and journeyed right across France to Fontarabia, a gaming place in the North of Spain, quite out of the tourist's track, and known only to old hands like the General.

When the season ended at Fontarabia they went down to Saxon-les-Bains, and in the winter they came up to St. Sebastian, and thence in due course, with the rest of their tribe, they shifted their quarters to some other place where the excitement of play and fast living was to be found.

Habitual pleasure-seekers are the dullest people in the world ; but not one of them was so lumpish and heavy and sour as Harding. No one ever heard him laugh, or knew him to do a kind action for anybody ; and yet, not so very long ago the slightest thing would set him roaring with laughter, the smallest appeal to sympathy draw quick and generous response from him.

He had outlived sentiment, and saw everything from a hard, material point of view. Why should he laugh who saw no fun in anything? Why should he feel for the misfortunes of others who was getting callous even to the sorrows of his own life? There were no lights and shadows in his sunless existence, no contrast of hope and disappointment—all things seemed to his numbed senses monotonous, same, and worthless.

He played as he drank—not for pleasure, but relief and distraction, as some take narcotics to cure insomnia, and with the same result: the dose had to be continually increased to produce the desired effect. And as he would sit over his bottle, bibbing and bibbing until his brain got muddled and perverse, so he would play, staking his money a handful at a time, recklessly indifferent whether he lost or won, while the chances were fairly equal, scarcely knowing

what he did, until some persistent run of ill-luck would sting him and rouse a savage feeling of resentment ; then he would obstinately contend against some luckless series, or put all he had upon a number that had just turned up, the odds against him being about thirty-seven to one.

He found companions who stuck to him close enough while he kept his purse open, and left him the moment he drew the strings. There is no need to trace his history through those three years of debasement, of going down step by step from the rank of a gentleman to the level of a blackguard ; it is pleasant neither to write about nor to read about.

During this time the General's life was not altogether a happy one. In the first place, he seemed decidedly to have left his luck behind him at Monte Carlo. One after the other every system he tried broke down

before the relentless 'series.' His losses were not great, to be sure, but his gains were proportionately small. A constant player, if he be prudent also, may fairly calculate upon his loss at the end of the year being brought by the invariable laws of chance to exactly the two and a half per cent. exacted by the bank upon the stakes ; and, as a matter of fact, the General, who restricted his venture to a modest two hundred and fifty francs a day, lost no more than three hundred pounds at the tables in those three years.

With an equal share of Harding's capital at the beginning, he could have gone on playing at this rate to a patriarchal age, and lived in an enviable state of self-content. But circumstances prevented Harding's fortune being realized and divided all in one batch, or he would have quitted his companion very soon after they left Mentone, and he perceived what kind of a player he had for a

partner. It came in piecemeal, as one farm after another was disposed of, at ever-widening distances, and in such diminishing quantity that it became obvious there must soon be no more to divide.

A much larger fortune than his would have been inadequate to meet for many years such enormous drains as Harding put upon it by his reckless prodigality and foolhardy play. He was driving post-haste along the road to ruin ; the General knew it, perceived his utter inability to put on the brake or turn the driver's course, and, what was the worst part of it all for him, he was compelled to stick in the same trap.

Things were brought to a crisis in the spring of the third year, when a letter came from Playfair enclosing a cheque for five hundred pounds, the price of Sir Henry Harding's last acres, less legal expenses, and with it a polite intimation that the worthy

solicitors felt it advisable to close accounts with their respected client.

A deeper shade of gloom fell upon Harding's face, as the reflection that now he had not a single stick of timber or inch of ground to call his own raised once more that old remorseful speculation on what might have been. But it passed away with another reflection as the garçon brought him his morning dose of absinthe.

‘What's the good of race, or estate, or name, or anything, to such as I?’

Later on, when he had changed the cheque, he divided the bundle of notes in two, and, shoving one half towards the General, he said :

‘There's your half, old man ; now for the last flutter.’

‘A flutter!’ There was mockery in that word applied to such a log as he.

At the end of the evening's play the

General met Harding, and in a jubilant tone said :

‘ It’s all right, dear old chappie ; the *boule de neige* has doubled my capital.’

‘ Good job,’ replied Harding. ‘ I’m cleared out—every sou. I felt No. 26 wouldn’t win, so I planked all I had on it and lost.’

A little more faith in his *boule de neige* would have induced the General to part company with Harding even now, and leave him to settle his account with Destiny and the Hôtel de Madrid as he might. But he was too old now, despite the illusions of his sixty and odd years, to be cheated by shadows, and there was substance yet to be got out of Harding by careful management.

He had not heard anything of Denise ; but he felt sure she had not parted with all that fifty thousand she had so prudently secured for herself out of the estate.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BATTLE OF FLOWERS.

‘I’ve not had a good week,’ said the General one morning, ‘not a memorably good week, dear boy, since we left Monte Carlo. Now there, you know, I always was lucky.’

‘I don’t know why the deuce you haven’t thought of that before.’

‘Well, we’ve never been so confoundedly pinched as we are at present. I think, old chappie, we ought to go there.’

‘It’s all the same to me. Go if you like. Only ’—after a moment’s pause—‘I don’t want to put up at the Villa Bella Vista again.’

‘I only wish we had the means to do it, dear boy.’

The Villa Bella Vista, with its passion-flowers and roses, came back to Harding’s memory; a paradise it seemed to him now, seen from the purgatory of moral debasement and conscious ignominy in which he existed. ‘If I had it to do again,’ he thought, ‘I’d not be such a sentimental idiot. Liz might have made a decent fellow of me by this time. She did love me—pretty Liz!—no mistake about that.’ And Liz, in her quaint Dutch bonnet and dove-coloured dress, rose another spectre to add to his self-reproach.

He flung his glass down on the pavement, shivering it to pieces, in childish, idiotic rage, because these recollections came unbidden to torment him. What was the use of being a log if he might not enjoy a log’s insensibility? Why might not a man live like a cabbage till the time came for him to die and rot? Why

should these confounded thoughts crop up again just because those last acres were gone? Was it all to begin over again? Was no rest to be got?

When they reached the Riviera the General selected a grubby hotel on the outskirts of Mentone for their residence, wishing to subject Harding to the physical discomforts of poverty as a means of making him more readily accept the proposal he should soon have to submit.

‘We are so deucedly hard up, dear boy,’ he said, ‘that we shan’t have a five-franc piece to punt with if we don’t economize.’

‘Have it your own way,’ said Harding, and he put up with the dirty linen and greasy cuisine, and third-class railway journeys to Monte Carlo, patiently enough for a week.

Then one morning, on their way to the station, he stopped before an enormous

placard and read down the programme of the carnival at Nice.

‘What’s to-day?’ he asked.

‘The fifth.’

‘Battle of flowers on to-day.’

‘I prefer roulette, old chappie.’

‘I don’t. We’ll have a trap, get a couple of big noses and a basket of violets, and make fools of ourselves.’

‘It will cost a hundred francs. Who’s to pay for it?’

‘You. What does it matter if it costs two hundred? You’ve got more than that. Do you begrudge it?’ he asked, turning savagely on the General. ‘Whose money is it, after all?’

‘Dear boy, dear boy!’ remonstrated the General. ‘We may forget that we are poor; but we must not forget that we are gentlemen.’

One would have thought that he really was a gentleman, and a fine one, too, by the air

he gave himself. When Harding was about to get into a third-class carriage, the General drew him away, and, opening the door of a first-class compartment, stood back, raising his hat, for him to enter first. It might be a farce, but the General was not one to clown his part.

At Nice they went to Laurent's, and found the choice of vehicles reduced to three. Harding insisted upon taking a small donkey-cart drawn by two donkeys in tandem, and ordered the equipage to be decorated with orange-blossom while they were lunching. Then he bought a couple of enormous noses, one for himself and the other for the General, and a child's cradle which he filled with violets. Heaven knows what motive he had for this folly; certainly it was not with any sense of humour, for he made these preparations as gloomily as though they were for a funeral. Possibly he saw that the whole

affair was vulgar and in bad taste, and he went in for it with the same perversity that led him to stake his money madly at the tables.

The General would have made a stand against wearing that long nose and making himself part of the sorry exhibition ; but he had special reasons at this time for humouring his companion and bringing him into an indulgent humour, having come now to a very critical juncture, which involved nothing less than some sort of a confession of his own villainy. He could not afford to stand on his dignity and oppose Harding, and the only hope was that a new caprice would seize his companion before the battle which would lead him to abandon the silly freak.

But Harding was in his sourest mood to-day, and stuck obstinately to his idea, the more so, maybe, because he saw it was against the General's inclinations. He himself ad-

justed the old man's nose, on the end of which was an enormous bluebottle, before he put on his own.

‘You look a regular beast, old man,’ he said, with the grunt that was his nearest approach to a laugh. ‘Pity it hides your venerable moustache.’

They got into the cart, Harding taking the driver's place, and the General sitting beside him on the narrow seat with the cradle of flowers wedged in between his long legs, which was very uncomfortable, besides being disgustingly grotesque.

Then they drove down the boulevard amidst the jeers of the masquers, and, entering the course, fell in with the procession of gaily ornamented equipages moving slowly along before the densely packed throng behind the barriers, the grand-stands, and the tribune. They were pelted with flowers, but Harding never returned a single bouquet

—he left that part of the tomfoolery to the General. He, with his head sunk in his shoulders, took no notice of anyone or anything but the donkeys he was driving.

‘Don’t you think we’ve had about enough of it, dear boy?’ suggested the General, when they had gone twice round the course, and the cradle was emptied.

‘No; mean to be the last on the course; get my money’s worth out of these donkeys.’

And so he drove twice more up and down the course with dogged perseverance, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and began a third. At a little distance from the grandstand there was a block which compelled him to halt. Just as he was starting afresh, a child’s shrill laugh, high and clear like a silver bell, struck on his ear, and for the first time he turned his heavy eyes from the backs of his donkeys and glanced at the crowd.

A gentleman was holding a child up to

look at the funny man with the donkeys. The child screamed anew with laughter as Harding turned his grotesque face, and, looking down at a sweet little lady, cried :

‘ Look, mammie, look ! Funny man ! Dime f’owers !’

The lady put a bunch of pansies from her basket into the chubby little hand, and the child tossed it towards Harding with another shrill peal of laughter. The procession moved on. Harding’s whip-hand fell, the whip was caught by the wheel and dragged from his nerveless fingers unnoticed as he strained round to catch a last glimpse of the group. The child had found a fresh object of delight, and the sweet little lady was giving fresh flowers to throw to another.

They knew not who he was—that funny man down whose cheek a single tear was trickling ; but he knew them. It was Bernard Thrale who held the child, and mammie

was Denise—his own wife, more beautiful than ever for the maternal tenderness in her face, sweet and smiling as if his ruin had cast no shadow on her life!

The General recognised them, and without surprise. At the beginning of the week he had telegraphed to Denise—a telegram, though it cost a trifle more than a letter, is cheap as avoiding the necessity of tedious explanation—addressing the wire to Harding Court, on the chance of its finding her there or being forwarded :

‘ Harry here. Come at once, if you would save him.—Address, General G., chez Boulot, Café de Paris, Monte Carlo.’

That was his message ; and the promptitude with which Denise had responded to the appeal augured so well for the replenishment of his exhausted funds that the General

had reason to feel well satisfied. He was not less pleased to mark the token of emotion upon Harding's cheek. Emotional persons, if you only know how to handle them, are so much more easily managed than those of the apathetic, calculating sort.

They were a long while reaching the exit, the course being now at its fullest ; but as soon as they were outside Harding, without a word, flung down the reins, tore off his papier-maché nose, and, jumping down from the cart, pushed his way through the scattering crowd in the direction of the grand-stand. There was no definite purpose in his mind beyond the simple object of finding his wife, of feasting his eyes upon her beauty, of setting his heart bleeding anew with the cruel stabs of remorse. What he should do if he found her, what he should say if they spoke to him, he never for a moment considered.

It was not until the course was empty, the crowd dispersed—not until he had gone a dozen times from end to end of the thronged boulevard, glancing from face to face, examining each group, peering into the open restaurants, and finally abandoning the hopeless task from sheer exhaustion, that he began to speculate on the possible outcome of meeting Denise and Thrale.

He felt sure he must find them sooner or later. As soon as he was a bit set up he'd have another hunt. If they had gone home because of their child it didn't matter; he would search for them to-morrow. And when they met, what should he do? He knew. It didn't take long to decide that.

There was no thought of vengeance in his purpose; no reproach, recrimination or passionate appeal presented themselves to his imagination. There should be no 'scene,' no theatrical nonsense of any kind. He'd

shake hands with them if they would let him ; bygones should be bygones ; he wouldn't rake up past grievances or say anything to make them uncomfortable, if only they would treat him as a kind of old friend and allow him to call and see them from time to time. Anything in the world if he might only look at Denise now and then—Denise who loved him once, whom nothing could make him cease to love.

A half-drowned cur, dragging its benumbed limbs from the ooze had more courage than this wretch, soddened to the very core of his heart with misery.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NEMESIS.

HARDING slept at Nice that night—if such rest as he got might be called sleep—and began his search again next morning. Towards the evening, when hunger began to tell upon him, he found he had not enough to pay for a two-franc dinner. Without money he could not continue his search. But he knew where he should find the General, and, scraping his loose pieces together, he found enough to buy a third-class ticket to Monte Carlo.

On the steps of the Casino he met the General, looking less jaunty than usual—

indeed, the old man's position was so gravely embarrassing that it needed extraordinary assurance to conceal his anxiety. At the sight of Harding he brightened up wonderfully.

‘Dear boy, you are the very Johnnie I was hoping to find!’ said he, grasping Harding’s limp hand.

‘Same to you,’ replied Harry sullenly. ‘I want a hundred francs.’

‘So do I, dear chappie. Fifty, twenty, five—anything you can let me have, for I’m absolutely stone-broke. The most extraordinary down-run on red I ever knew; twelve consecutive reds, and the eleventh cleared me out completely. Where are you going, dear boy?’ as Harding, with a grunt, tore his arm from the General’s amicable grasp and turned on his heel.

‘Back to Nice.’

‘Mentone’s nearer; and we can get lodging there on credit.’

‘I’m going to Nice, I tell you,’ Harding replied, striding westward.

‘Tell me why, dear boy,’ the General asked, with difficulty keeping pace and speaking at the same time.

‘To look for *them*.’

‘If you mean Mr. Thrale and your wife, you’ll not find them there. They’re at Mentone.’

‘At Mentone?’

Harding stopped dead short as he put the question.

‘At Mentone. Met them on the platform when I got out of the train night before last. I’ll tell you all about it if you’ll go a bit slower.’

Harding was striding off now eastward.

‘Out with it,’ he said, slackening his pace.

‘They were only in Nice for a few hours. It was the first break on their journey from——’

‘How do you know?’ asked Harding, again stopping short.

‘They told me.’

‘You have spoken to her, and she to you?’ cried the poor wretch, in astonishment and envy.

‘Of course ; why not?’

‘Lucky beggar ! lucky beggar ! Come on. Do you know where they’re staying?’

‘To be sure.’

The General pulled out his note-case and found a slip of paper. Another stop as Harding took the slip and read it by the light of a gas-lamp.

‘Why, it’s her writing!’ said he, with a foolish titter. ‘Her writing—her own hand!’

He clasped the piece of paper between his palms ; looked at it again ; lifted it and pressed it hard against his flabby cheek.

The General cleared his throat. It was a ticklish thing, this, he had to reveal.

‘I’ve never told you my history, dear boy,’ he began, as they moved on.

‘Damn your history!’ he exclaimed; and then ‘Hôtel d’Angleterre’ he murmured, as if to print it upon his memory.

‘I think it’s my duty, you know, to tell you something about my past.’

‘Fire away, if you like.’ He held the paper up in the moonlight. ‘I can read it by the moon,’ he said, sniggering. ‘“Denise Harding.” She still keeps my name,’ he added, with a semblance of pride in his tone.

‘Of course.’

‘I thought she would have taken Thrall’s.’

‘Well, as I was saying, you know, dear boy, about two-and-twenty years ago——’

‘Old man,’ said Harding, in a timid voice, ‘do you think she would speak to me?’

‘Well, that depends on circumstances.’

‘Oh, I promise I won’t make a fool of myself—no fear! Not a word about the

past. No unpleasing allusions to their relations, you know. I've made up my mind about that. I won't offend them—not for the world! I just want them to regard me as an acquaint—a sort of friend,' he urged in an insinuating tone, fingering his ragged beard apprehensively. 'If they would just let me call upon them now and then—say, once a week at the outside—to chat about ordinary trifles with her—Denise!'

'I dare say that can be managed.'

'Oh, if you only could, old man! It'd make such a lot of difference to me. I should be so jolly grateful to you!'

He took the General's arm and pressed it, the thumb and finger of the other hand in his waistcoat-pocket softly smoothing the slip of paper with her name on it.

They walked some little distance in silence, Harding nursing his delightful project, the General taxing his ingenuity to turn Hard-

ing's suggestion to account without committing himself.

But no ; he could find no means of getting money and escaping revelation at the same time. So he cleared his throat again, and began his history once more. He spun out the details at considerable length, to gain time for reflection and smooth the way. That made no difference to Harding ; he pursued his own delightful train of thought, as oblivious of the General's history as of the lap of the waves amongst the rocks below.

So in this manner they walked along the beautiful Corniche Road, now in full moonlight, now in deep shade, as the path followed the sinuous contour of the precipitous mountain-side, until Harding's ear caught a word that bore connection with the recollections revolving in his brain.

‘ What's that you said about Victoria ? ’ he asked.

‘I was saying that, for reasons which it is unnecessary to particularize, I left Mrs. Gordon in the second year of our marriage at Victoria, and took my passage to Marseilles. There the happy thought occurred to me to run down to Monte Carlo and try my hand at the tables——’

‘Only the eternal Monte Carlo!’ thought Harding; and then he said to himself that he would certainly get his hair cut and his beard shaved off—or trimmed would be better, perhaps, as his face had got so ugly—before he ventured to call upon Denise. They walked best part of another mile before his meditations were again broken; then, stopping, he said:

‘Hold hard! I didn’t catch that about Denise; go back a bit.’

‘On the top of the stairs, just against my door on the landing—you remember my diggings in Piccadilly?’

‘Yes, yes. Go on.’

‘I kick my foot against something, strike a vesta, and there, to my complete bewilderment, I find a pretty little girl, about seventeen, sitting on the top of an old trunk, her shoulders resting in the angles of the wall, and sound asleep. I tap her on the shoulder, and, as she rouses a bit, “My dear young woman,” says I, “who are you, and what on earth are you doing here?” “Oh, if you please,” says she, rubbing her eyes, “I am Denise, and I’ve just come from Australia, and want to see General Gordon.” “Well, my dear,” says I, “*I* am General Gordon.” “Then you’re my father!” says she.’

‘What!’ cried Harding, shifting his position to confront him. ‘This girl you are speaking of was Denise—my wife?’

‘Yes, and my daughter.’

‘Your daughter?’

The General shrugged his shoulders.

‘So I am told,’ said he.

‘Wait ; I must understand this. Sit down here.’

They were upon a bridge that crossed a ravine. Far below the breaking waves flashed in the moonlight like electric sparks. The General did not like the look of it, and would have gone on, with some excuse about his susceptibility to rheumatism and the coldness of the seat ; but Harding was too excited to listen to such trifles, and forced the old man to sit down, turning sideways to face each other.

‘Now go on,’ he said.

‘Well,’ continued the General, with as much ease as he could assume—‘well, dear boy, what was I to do ? I should have liked to do the right thing, of course, especially as Denise was a girl any man might be proud to own as his daughter. But my circumstances would not permit it. The want of money

has been the ruin of my character. If I had only had the settled income of, say, a bishop——'

'Never mind your damned philosophy ; get on !'

'How could I do it, dear chappie ? I had barely enough to keep myself in that Piccadilly garret and pay my tailor's bill. I couldn't afford to keep a house and servants, furnish her with clothes and luxuries, and all that. Besides, it didn't at all agree with my tastes and habits. It wasn't to be done. I put it to Denise plainly : " My dear," says I, " you may be my daughter for all I know to the contrary, but I can't afford to own it. You must earn your living as a domestic drudge. You must go back to Victoria, *or* you must agree to my planting you on some wealthy family of my acquaintance as the destitute daughter of an old friend." After some little consideration, she accepted

the latter alternative, and I planted her on Mrs. Balfour.'

'Then, it was you who first taught her to deceive.'

'I admit the justice of that reproach, dear chappie, for had I not taught her to deceive, you would never have met her, and you might have been a happier man.'

'Oh, I don't reproach you—not I! It's not my love for her nor my wasted life that I regret. If it were to do again, I'd do it, though I lost her again. Just to touch her hand once more would pay for all.'

'That's sound philosophy, dear boy. What does it matter how much we lost yesterday if we win to-day?'

'If——'

'It's never too late to win.'

'Don't talk such rot to me; I'm past dreaming.'

‘ But not past awaking, dear boy.’

‘ What do you mean ?’

‘ Supposing—remember, I’m a dreamer, dear chappie,’ said the General tentatively, parenthetically edging himself a little further from Harding and the dangerous side of the parapet—‘ supposing you should awake to-night to find you had been dreaming three years ?’

He paused, but Harding made no response. His back was directly against the full moon ; the General could not discern a feature of his face, still less the spasmodic twitching of his lips, the gathering frenzy in his eye, and he continued :

‘ Supposing I could show you that every wrong you have been brooding over was simply imaginary ?’

He paused again, inwardly cursing the moonlight that prevented him seeing the effect of his revelation, doubting if it

had yet touched Harding's sluggish understanding.

‘Supposing,’ he pursued, ‘that I could prove to you that Denise is yet a faithful wife, Thrale still a true and loyal friend—what would you say to me?’

‘Say to you!’ cried Harding, springing up. ‘Say! Why, I’d fall upon my knees and bless you as an angel come to snatch me from damnation!’

‘And on the principle advanced just now, when you would have forgiven Denise all for the sake of touching her hand, you would bear me no ill will for any little irregularities of which I may have been guilty in these past three years?’

‘There’s not a thing I couldn’t forgive for such a joy!’

‘Then,’ continued the General rapidly, encouraged by success, ‘then, to crown your joy, if I could show not only that your wife

is pure, your friend unchanged, but also that the child who cried to you at Nice was your own son——'

With the fury of a madman, and with a madman's inconsistency, Harding sprang upon the General, and, clutching him by the throat, cried :

'Tell me this is true, or I'll strangle you !'

The General struggled to free himself. His hat fell, striking the parapet, and toppling over into the abyss.

'You're choking me—are you mad?' he gasped.

'I shall be, if this hope you've raised is false. Tell me it's true!' cried Harding fiercely.

'By God, it's true—every word of it!'

'And the man I saw in my wife's room?'

'It was I—I swear it !'

Harding was silent, but his fingers tight-

ened on the old man's throat, and, holding him at arm's length, he shook him, looking into his distorted face with relentless vengeance. It took his brain, excited to the pitch of madness, but a little while to realize the whole truth.

‘And you knew this from the beginning?’ he muttered. ‘You have known it these four years, and seen me sinking day by day without remorse or pity—sinking deep into a hell beyond redemption—sinking from manhood to beasthood, to such a vile condition that I dare not claim wife or friend or child for mine!’

‘Let me go—let me go!’ gasped the General.

‘Oh, you shall go soon enough!’ cried Harding.

He suffered the old man to slip down upon the road; then, gripping him about the waist, he lifted him up as if he had been a bag of

shavings, and threw him on the parapet, face downwards.

‘That’s where you are going,’ he said, holding the helpless wretch’s head down by the nape of the neck over the chasm. ‘Down there, where the water shines amongst the rocks.’ He thrust the old head further forward, while the General clutched at the parapet, tearing the finger-nails from his fingers in his frantic efforts to escape. ‘I’ll give you time to pray—not to me, for you’ve left no mercy in my soul. Pray to Heaven to forgive you for robbing me of wife and child and friend, of honour and name, and all hope of salvation.’

The General screamed for help, feeling his fingers breaking and his body slowly sliding forward under the steady thrust upon his neck.

‘Go ; I’ve no more time to waste on you,’ said Harding, spluttering through the inky

blood that now welled up into his mouth at every breath. 'You shall be first down there--go !'

The old man screamed again as his fingers broke away from the parapet and he felt his balance go ; then headlong he shot down through space. He struck the sharp rocks with a dull thud, but there was no sound after that save the gentle lapping of the waves.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END.

HARDING felt dizzy and sick and faint, not with the reflection that he had killed a man with whom he had lived in a kind of brotherhood for three years, or with apprehension of the consequences to himself when the murder was discovered : for his sole thought was of finding Denise, of showing her how he had been deceived, of justifying himself, of claiming her forgiveness for the base suspicion that had driven him to despair and ruin.

The cause was chiefly physical. He had been tramping about all day without food,

and on the top of that there was this other affair. It was evident he had ruptured a vessel again, not seriously, as on the previous occasion, or it would have floored him at once as it had then. He would be all right again presently ; so he sat down on the parapet for two minutes, wiping the sweat from his clammy temples and trying to persuade himself that the hæmorrhage was abating.

Then the thought that he had an hour's walk before him, and that the Hôtel d'Angleterre might be closed when he reached Mentone, gave him energy, if not strength, and he started up with the dogged determination not to succumb under this attack. The road seemed to give under his feet, the rocks to be going up and up before him ; he had to fix his eyes upon a distant mark to make a straight line, just as if he had been drinking heavily. As he staggered on, a man came

into sight and stopped in his path, asking if it were he who had screamed aloud just now. Harding waved him aside with his arm, and would have passed ; but the man, seeing blood upon his beard, caught him by the shoulder, and only just in time, for Harding, spinning round on one heel, fell fainting into his arms.

When he recovered consciousness the glare of a paraffin lamp was in his eyes, and the light falling on a buffet, with many bottles and an urn for the garçon's *pourboires*, showed him that he was in a café. For a moment he could not understand how he had come there, nor why he lay at full length on this mattress, with a billiard-board, of all things in the world, for a bedstead ; then it flashed upon him that he was to find Denise and tell her all, and he struggled to rise.

A hand was laid upon his shoulder gently, but he had no strength to combat even the

lightest touch, and, falling back, he found a motherly woman in a marmotte leaning over him.

‘Mentone—Mentone!’ he said in desperation.

‘You must not move, sir,’ answered the woman in French loudly, as the invalid was clearly a foreigner. ‘See, you’ve made yourself bad again. Here’s a soft clean serviette. There, lie so. My husband’s gone over to Cabé Roquebrun for the doctor.’

‘Mentone,’ murmured Harding feebly.

‘Yes; you shall go to Mentone tomorrow.’

‘No more!’ thought Harding. ‘It’s all up with me. I shan’t see Mentone again;’ and a vision of the garden and its flowers, of the blue sea and sky framed in twining roses and passion-flowers, came before his closed eyes. ‘Denise shall know I was all right, then—that there was nothing wrong

between me and Liz. If I don't tell 'em, she and Bernard will think I ran away to live there with her. Oh, they mustn't think so badly of me as that !'

And with that fear he endeavoured to raise his hand and get the paper from his waistcoat-pocket, but his hand was like lead and his muscles seemed fibreless. The woman understood what he wanted to do, and, feeling in his waistcoat - pocket, brought out the slip of paper and read it at his mute bidding.

'To-morrow,' she said, having read the address and comprehended his wish.

'Now, now,' he muttered.

She pointed to the clock, and explained the impossibility of sending to Mentone at this hour, of awaking the people of the hotel, and of finding any vehicle to bring a lady across. 'To-morrow,' she repeated soothingly, 'to-morrow.'

‘Too late,’ thought he; ‘I shall be dead when they come. They will see only the wreck of what was once a decent man. They’ll learn that I have lived four years in debauchery, but they’ll never know the truth. They’ll say, “It’s a mercy he is gone; we couldn’t have won him back; he would always have been a trouble to us—a shame to his child.” Oh, if they only knew the misery of these years, my yearning to bring back the past.’ Then he began to cry in sheer pity of himself.

He lapsed into unconsciousness of surrounding things as the life slowly ebbed away, and passed the night in a long dream made up of memories chiefly of happy days. But towards the end his perceptive faculties revived, and his feelings had a manlier and healthier tone, as if invigorated by those dreams of his better life. He thought now, not of his own past misery and suffering, but

of his wife's, and the tears that ran down his cheek were no longer for himself.

A mist was gathering over him, so that he could see nothing clearly, when he felt his hand lifted up and pressed, warm breath upon his brow and gentle lips upon his eyes.

‘Who—who?’ he asked faintly, yet with joy.

‘Dear Harry, it is I—your wife——’

‘Poor wife, poor wife! Dear love! Is that Bernard?’

‘Yes, here I am, old chap.’

‘Take my other hand. There! Friend and wife—once more mine. Think of me, not as I am, but as I should have been.’

‘Here’s our son, dear. Your boy, Harry.’

‘Harry—my boy! This little thing his hand! May he be strong and brave—and have faith—faith—faith in others more than

in himself. Harry, be good — good to mam^em^e.’

And then, that they might not see his agony, he turned his face aside, knowing that the end was come.

THE END.

[March 1895.]



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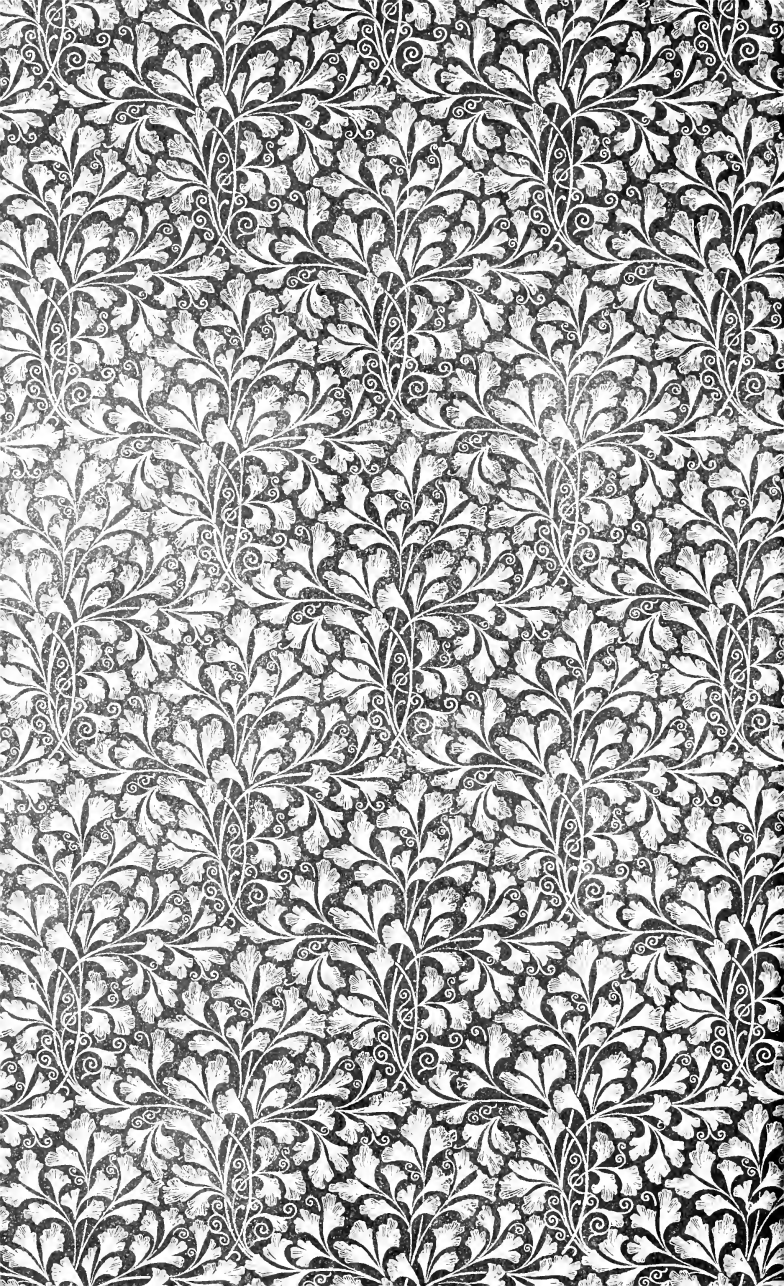
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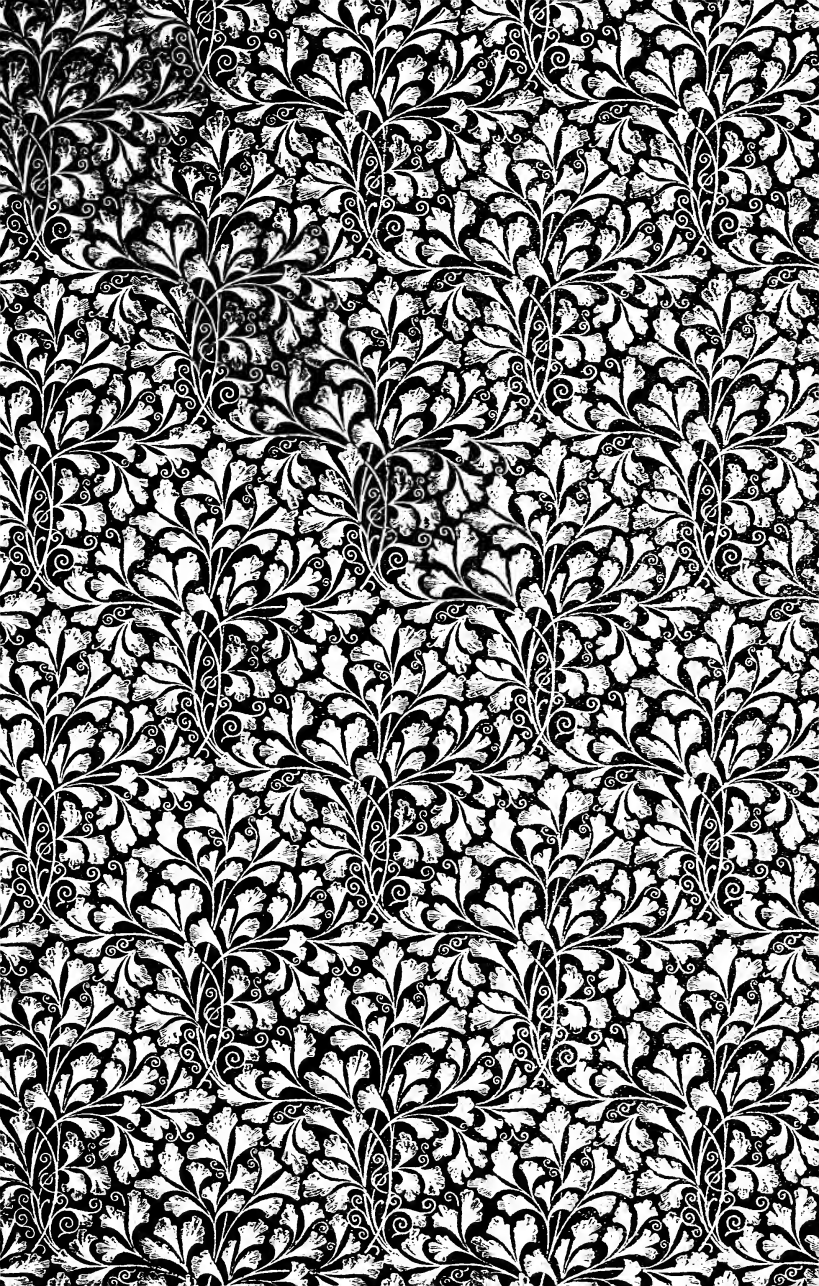
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